

September 2021

**WORKERS PARTY (NORTH BELFAST) SUBMISSION TO THE PUBLIC
CONSULTATION ON THE EXTENSION OF THE GLIDER SERVICE**





Workers Party (North Belfast) submission to the public consultation on plans to extend the Glider Service

The Workers Party welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the public consultation on the extension of the existing Glider Services and on the proposed route options.

We are committed to supporting high quality, effective, efficient, integrated and affordable public transport services.

The relatively recent introduction of the East – West Glider service represented a major and progressive step change in the principles and provision of public transport in Belfast. Its full impact has yet to be fully realised but the uptake of the service, the cross-city connectivity, its frequency and its vehicle specification have heralded changes in commuter behaviour as well as contributing to a broader cultural shift.

Those outcomes, as a minimum, should also be sought for the extension of the Glider service to North Belfast.

Much more than a bus route

The provision of public transport services should target and address a range of social priorities. It must always be about much more than operating a bus route.

At its core, it should provide a key public service, encourage social mobility, help reduce isolation, contribute to health and well-being, facilitate access, make a positive contribution to the development of local social infrastructure and radically alter commuting patterns and priorities.

A public transport service, and the Glider service specifically, must not be seen or developed as a silo or stand-alone service. It must be integrated closely with existing and new transport initiatives and act as a transport catalyst.

The current consultation process must take the opportunity to look beyond the immediate, effectively addressing a transport strategy for North Belfast. It must also free itself from the administrative, social and political ‘tram lines’ that appear to have already constrained it to a point where its potential benefit is severely curtailed.

The Route Options

It is disappointing that the consultation process has been structured to encourage only the minimum of input based around a ‘one route option’. It is also depressing to see how that has been accepted and reinforced by initial public comments from individuals and political parties locally.

The presentation of an ‘either/or’ Glider route option and using that as the basis for discussion is lacking, unimaginative and self-defeating.

The Workers Party believes that only by extending the options, the discussion and the vision can this process make any meaningful contribution to the development of public transport services and to the north Belfast community.

Intentionally or not, the presentation of 'one of three' Glider route options has been interpreted in a blinkered, tribal and knee jerk reaction that is all too familiar. The narrowness of the vision has been reinforced by the narrowness of many of the initial responses.

Our contribution to this discussion will be based on the beneficial impact an extension of the Glider service can have for this part of the city and beyond. It will not seek to pander to existing community divisions and nor will it seek to waste the potential offered by a north Belfast Glider service by adopting a tribal approach.

The Workers Party views north Belfast in its totality. We vision North Belfast as a single community, albeit that it presents as a divided patchwork. The development of any public service, transport included, should be directed towards and of benefit to all of the community, not simply those who live on, or near, one of its better-known arterial routes.

Starting with the premise of '*this is the money we have available*' does not deliver options - it negates them. Restricting the route(s) of the proposed north Belfast Glider service to a single arterial path will neither serve the collective north Belfast community nor will it allow it to achieve the objectives which the project has set for itself.

The alternative inclusive circular route

As a direct alternative to the proposed route options, the Workers Party is proposing a single circular route from the city centre via York Street, Shore Road, the Abbey Centre to Glengormley, the Antrim Road (onward to Carlisle Circus and the city centre) with a secondary route along the North Circular Road, Ballysillan, Woodvale, Shankill Road and onward to the city centre. The single route should operate with clockwise and counter clockwise services.

This approach would address the public transport needs of a significantly greater number of residents and businesses than is being proposed currently. It would provide links and access to key social facilities including Yorkgate railway halt, the Abbey Centre, Belfast Zoo, health and care facilities at Carlisle, Grove and Shankill and leisure and recreational amenities at the Waterworks, Grove, Ballysillan and Shankill. It would not be incompatible with the provision of any proposed transport hubs or park & ride schemes in north Belfast.

The circular link as proposed would also greatly facilitate greater integration of the community in North Belfast and beyond as well as providing a direct link to the current east - west Glider service and the proposed south Belfast route.

The inclusive nature of this approach is also much more likely to act as a catalyst for further regeneration, commercial and retail developments.

The proposal to extend Glider services to north Belfast is a once in a generation opportunity to transform public transport, not just in this area but for the whole city, open up access, develop social inclusion and deliver a safer, cleaner, greener city.

To attempt to apply a restrictive administrative solution to this unique opportunity to transform the local community infrastructure would be an opportunity lost and a serious setback to the potential development of the entire north Belfast area.

It is in that context that this consultation process must be set.

Traditional approaches, existing mindsets and organisational cultures should not be allowed to act as an impediment to what could be a transformative project.

Funding the North Belfast Glider service

Details of the proposed budget for the extension of Glider services do not appear prominently in the consultation document, but based on the cost of the east-west service it is reasonably safe to assume that the joint north-south proposal could cost in the region of £100 million.

We understand that bids will be made under the Belfast City Scheme to secure a portion of the monies.

Set against the social, economic, environmental and health benefits which an extended Glider service could help provide, this should be seen as a major investment in the community.

The broader vision outlined in this submission would of course incur significantly more expenditure and investment.

To restrict the extension of the Glider service to a single limited access route would constitute a significant and potentially wasteful investment. As previously argued, it is important for the success of this project that it is seen and acted upon in the round.

While the Glider service should not be seen in isolation from the city's broader public transport needs neither should it be separated from the wider social realities.

If we are serious about social, political and economic development then we need to assess the existing expenditure on projects which hinder, limit and negate the very development we are seeking to achieve,

The cost of maintaining segregated education is estimated, conservatively, at £95 million per annum. That equates to around £475 million over the five years it will take to deliver an extension to the Glider service. That's almost enough for five glider extension projects.

The financial cost of 'peace walls' – maintaining existing ones and funding new ones – runs to £2 billion every year. Over the lifetime of the Glider extension programme that equates to £10 billion. Even a share of that monies redirected to the Department of Infrastructure would secure the Glider extension plans and refinance all existing Translink services.

This is a time for bold decisions on the future of public transport in north Belfast and beyond. It is a time for imagination, fresh thinking and radical political leadership.

Anything short of a comprehensive and inclusive approach will fail not only this project but will fail future generations, condemning them to more of the same.

This is not an abstract argument. How we develop and fund our public services including our public transport, impacts directly on the whole community. Are we saying that physical barriers and a segregated education system remain our priorities, or do we say that we will fund the future from the narrow political divisiveness of the past? Public transport initiatives provide an opportunity to demonstrate that. We must take it.

**Workers Party
North Belfast**

6 Springfield Road
Belfast BT12 7AG

workerspartyni@yahoo.co.uk

www.workerspartyelection.wordpress.com