I see that you are questioning Jude Leitch of Northumberland Tourism on Wednesday 16/11/16, so here are

LAST WEEK’S MAJOR NEW DEVELOPMENTS relating to the information which I gave to you in my original submission about tourism in Northumberland and public transport access:

1) In the aftermath of the September’s subsidy cuts to Arriva's X14 service between urban areas and Rothbury, which cut the usable connections to the rural Spiritbuses routes, Spiritbuses did indeed cease operating their rural routes, which they have initiated and built up over the last two years, on 05/11/16, last Saturday.

Spiritbuses having established a need, Northumberland County Council put the routes out to tender, and they have been taken over by another local company, PCL Travel.

As well as their first rate service, I think that Spiritbuses managed to keep a good number of passengers on their routes by their innovative online presence. If you compare their online presence with that of their successor, PCL Travel, you will see that it is very different, and so the future of these popular visitor and rural routes is now going to depend on a different type of offer, (which I hope will be equally successful).

See:
- news announcement on Northumberland County Council's website for 14/09/16, "Council seeks new bus operator for Coquetdale service"
- announcements on Spiritbuses Facebook page, particularly 01/09/16 to date
- PCL Travel’s website

2) On Thursday 27/10/16, the agenda for the [largely urban] North East Combined Authority's Transport North East Committee meeting on Thursday 03/11/16 was published.

I was working, so couldn't go to watch, and the minutes probably won't be published until the week before their next meeting in February 2017, but here are some extracts from the agenda which I think are pertinent [I have added bold highlights]:

3.4 A NECA-wide bus strategy ‘scoping study’ is nearing completion and will be presented to this Committee in due course. The scoping study will update knowledge about the current bus system’s performance, and highlight the challenges faced – which include declining bus network and patronage, problems with bus punctuality, increasing fares and a lack of integration between modes in some places. It also reviews options to meet these challenges, including options in the Bus Services Bill.
3.5 Noting timescales for completion of the Bus Services Bill, officers consider it prudent to now start preparing a NECA-wide bus strategy as a ‘daughter document’ to the forthcoming Transport Plan. The strategy will build on the work undertaken for the scoping study, and should set out aims and objectives against which bus franchising, bus partnerships and other options could be appraised.

4 Next Steps

4.1 Members are asked to endorse the development of a NECA-wide bus strategy, building on the work of the scoping study, the existing transport policy context and the emerging NECA Transport Plan. It is envisaged that a draft strategy will be prepared for consultation in the New Year. The final strategy will be presented to this Committee for consideration later in 2017. At that time, the Committee may also wish to consider the appropriate next steps to delivering the strategy.

4.4 Concurrently, it is sensible to explore what partnership options may be available through discussions with the bus operators. Discussions between bus operators and NECA officers have been conducted over the summer. The Head of Transport at Durham County Council has offered to lead partnership discussions from the NECA side, with support from Nexus and Northumberland officers. Should a need for independent advice arise from these discussions, this Committee will be advised of funding arrangements.

[NEXUS is the body which has presided over transport provision in the urban authorities of Tyne and Wear for some years.]

I doubt very much whether the local rural bus operators in North Northumberland have been informed about this or had the chance to participate in the discussions which have been held over the summer as mentioned in 4.4, and so I am concerned for the future of the rural operators.

I have looked at the NEXUS website, which appears to be where Northumbrian public transport is heading very soon, and which would probably take over anything which Northumberland County Council is going to do on public transport.

Amongst other things I found:

"You are here: Current consultations » Have your say - review of local transport services

3 June 2016

Nexus carried out a public consultation from 6 June to 1 August in order to collect views from a wide variety of stakeholders, in particular users of our services in order to help us understand how people access public transport and what is important to them. This will shape the future of public transport services that Nexus will provide on behalf of the Combined Authority.

Results of the consultation are attached below." [
Pertinent extracts:

9. The questionnaire could be completed in a variety of ways: a. Online via nexus.org.uk/consultation b. Paper copy available via libraries, travel shops and on request

10. Paper copies were also provided to local councillors and at events attended by Nexus Customer Relations Officers (CROs)

Briefing sessions were held with elected members in Newcastle, North Tyneside, South Tyneside and Sunderland and a formal response was received from Gateshead Council. Sessions were also held with a number of stakeholder groups across Tyne and Wear including transport forums, residents’ associations, community and special interest groups.

The consultation was promoted via nexus.org.uk, local authority and NECA websites and through the local media and Council printed publications

14. In total 1,697 responses to the questionnaire were received, a further 72 surveys were returned either blank or incomplete. This compares to the Transport Manifesto consultation, where the final total number of responses received from across the whole of the NECA area was 1,736,

17. And, 92 responses were received from Durham residents and 44 [2.6%?] from Northumberland residents. 90 postcodes were not recognised.

I never saw any mention of this consultation, and there are no NEXUS travel shops away from the urban Metro system.

There was also a large-scale transport survey across Tyne and Wear about 18 months or 2 years ago, before the NE Combined Authority was properly underway, so the voice of rural people was not included in this either.

There are some apparently petty issues which actually make a big difference to how NEXUS would operate for rural routes: e.g.

a) Since the NEXUS-style timetables were posted up at Northumberland bus stops in late August 2016, some only display information for the direction of travel on the side of the road where they are posted. This is fine for urban areas, where there are bus shelters on each side of the road, but in rural areas there is usually only a bus shelter on one side of the road, so that half of the information which rural people need is now missing in some places such as Longframlington.

b) The NEXUS timetables also don't show return times. Again, this is fine for urban areas, but when people are e.g. standing in Morpeth bus station and seeing the new M1 service to Rothbury run by PCL of Prudhoe to link in with the network which they have taken over from Spiritbuses, the official timetables will only show the outgoing services, so will not
encourage people to try going out to the countryside on them and taking some trade to rural areas, because they will give no indication of when or if they will be able to get back.

It is the same old thing of not managing bus services as part of a network which needs to encourage people to use it, but simply for the purpose of getting disadvantaged people between A and B for the bare necessities.

c) The Northumberland County Council website bus travel section has a series of maps to show where all of the routes go, and so it shows people the possible connecting services which they could use in order to manage to get to where they need to be - more crucial where service frequencies are patchy.

Nexus has an interactive map, [which is only informative about bus routes at a very large scale, so is less useful for rural routes, which need a much smaller scale to accommodate their extent between scattered destinations] but you have to put in the details of your journey times, and it doesn't give details of all alternative routes so Nexus and Traveline unnecessarily preclude people from using the full range of scenic rural routes, when a simple map of available routes, rather than a journey planner which forces you to make decisions without having access to the full range of information, would show them that they could.

The NEXUS map is fine for people in town, where there are frequent services and all sorts of routes to choose from.

d) the NEXUS site doesn't appear to have a section where you can just put in a place-name and get the timetables for whichever buses go there. To bring up timetables, you have to put in the operator (which you might not know if going to a new place), and an optional route number (ditto).

e) Northumberland County Council used to have a monthly updated list of changes which were going to happen to bus services over the following 2 months, so that people could plan for service alterations, and know which operators were going to be running in their area and when.

This was particularly important for those of us who travel across Northumberland by bus, and not just in our immediate area or according to a specific itinerary, where we are more likely to know the news about service changes by word of mouth. Those with concessionary passes who travel in such a way bring trade to the more rural places which they visit.

This NCC list hasn't been updated since late May, and in late August it was removed altogether, but I have found no mention anywhere that information functions for Northumbrian buses are being/have been transferred to Nexus.
I also fear that since there is no mention of subsidised bus services in the North East Combined Authority's Transport Manifesto, the process of subsidising public bus services which would be accessible to tourists is likely to be discontinued, following the precedent in so many rural counties of late.

Now that it looks as though the transport functions of the North East Combined Authority are going to go ahead under NEXUS, its executive body, rather than an elected mayor, and and the geographical history of this body is firmly based in an urban location, far from the rural tourist areas, the planning for public transport for rural people themselves, let alone tourists, risks being poorly informed, inadequately considered and funded, and above all, without any direct accountability to taxpayers and voters, particularly in rural areas far from the seats of decision-making.

(N.B. potential competition for funding:

Metro - seems to be in need of much funding

Rail

major road projects

walking largely urban

cycling)

November 2016