BLYTH TOWN COUNCIL

Environment Committee

9 December 2025

Decision Report

Living Bus Shelters

Recommendation that the Committee consider:

- **Replacing bus shelters at point of renewal with living bus shelters**

Alternative schemes might be considered alongside/instead of this proposal as equally or more effective at fulfilling the aims through external funding (p.4).

Ward(s)

All

Risk Management

Financial: The annual budget for bus shelters of £11,000 in 2025/26 is allocated to BTC's contribution within the Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) through the North East Combined Authority (NECA) Enhanced Partnership. Living bus shelters could be included within this funding scheme.
Outside of this funding, should the Committee agree with the options outlined within the timescale, updated budget figures may be available to the Council in January 2026, or funding through balances for 2026/27. Additional options for finance could be explored e.g. advertising income, sponsorship by local businesses, charitable funding.
Revenue Maintenance costs are unknown at this stage but would be set through the partnership.

Timescale: Shelters funded through the BSIP are provisionally due by the end of March 2026. Pollinator activity is from mid-March. Waiting for additional reports or conducting further research can be accommodated.

Other: Any new scheme should limit waste (i.e. not replace shelters before end-of-life).

All schemes increase the number and proximity of pollinators (including those with the ability to sting/cause an allergic reaction) as an explicit aim to create benefits.

Objective
Promoting the environmental, social, and economic wellbeing of the town and its community.

Crime Prevention
Bus shelters currently attract an element of vandalism in respect of the mesh/Perspex panels.

Report
This report follows a proposal from Cllr B Erskine, seconded by Cllr M Peart, for Blyth Town Council (BTC) to explore the feasibility of "bee bus stops" or living bus shelters. These are bus shelters fitted with green roofs planted with pollinator-friendly vegetation. The proposal is attached as Appendix 1.

Key points:
- Living bus shelters support the aims of the proposal and the objectives of the Council.
- However, the proposal's aims might be *better* served through alternative schemes.
- They are equivalent in cost to regular shelters.
- Watering/maintenance is a barrier to implementation.

To illustrate the limitations of living shelters: in-ground planting to a similar scale as the Chase Farm Drive plot would deliver approx. 170m^2, the equivalent of 34 2-bay living bus shelters. Also, bus shelter planters are overhead, leaving people, especially children, with low interaction with the scheme and reliant on signage for information.

Shelter options
Suppliers can provide new shelters or in some cases offer retrofitting to existing shelters. Retrofitting depends on certain conditions and is subject to an on-site assessment by the supplier, and one supplier has indicated this is not commonly approved.

Both fitting new shelters and retrofitting will involve traffic management including temporary bus stop closures, replacement stops, or temporary traffic measures to allow room for work and equipment, all of which comes with costs Some sites might allow for off-road working. In the simplest scenario, a stop might need to be closed for one day.

Should this proposal be agreed, the most sustainable way to erect new shelters without waste is for the existing shelters to be replaced with living bus shelters as and when they near the end of their life; this happens elsewhere in living bus shelter schemes.

Some bus shelters in Blyth are under consideration for replacement within a separate funded Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) through the NECA

Enhanced Partnership.[1] Four of these sites are suitable sites for living bus shelters.

Quotes and Funding
Quotes have been received from suppliers indicating the cost to supply, deliver and install a new two-bay living bus shelter is approx. £5400. This is in line with regular bus shelters – a recently installed 2-bay cantilever shelter on the Broadway cost approximately £5400. Final costs are subject to site visit and depend on factors including the extent of traffic management.

There is an available budget within BTC for bus shelters of £11,000 for the current financial year, which would normally go towards one new shelter per year. However, this is allocated as BTC's contribution to the Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP), which is provisionally approved and is projected to be approved in early 2026. Shelters installed as part of this scheme could be nominated as living bus shelters.

In other living bus shelter schemes, the municipality did not incur any costs as the contracted bus shelter operator absorbed the installation and maintenance costs using income from advertising. In a third scheme, an amount of funding was available through a non-departmental government agency. It would take time to explore feasibility and then implement alternative funding options.

Maintenance
This is the main barrier to implementation. The most common filler for bus shelter roof planters is cassettes of pre-grown hardy sedums which only require watering during drought conditions. The Environment Agency has warned of a "medium" risk of drought in England in summer 2026.[2] Despite the recent wet weather, the North East is technically in a period of 'prolonged dry weather'.[3]

Initially BTC would request that Northumberland County Council (NCC) Grounds Maintenance be responsible for the watering and upkeep of the greenery through the Partnership Agreement. However, NCC have advised that while two team members have ladder training, there is no capacity within the watering schedule currently to accommodate additional watering of shelters. While this is expected to improve in the next few years, to fulfil maintenance needs in the short term an external contractor would be required.

A decision is required as to whether to proceed without a commitment to watering on a trial basis.

Evidence base
Aims 1 and 2: Supporting biodiversity and improving the local environment.
General claims are made about the environmental impact of living bus shelters ('supports biodiversity, reduces urban heat island effect') but specific

[1] North East Enhanced Partnership

[2] North East England having driest year for nearly a century | Hexham Courant

[3] Dry weather and drought in England: 21 to 27 November 2025 - GOV.UK

quantifiable evidence of impact is limited, and individual shelters have a very small footprint. See *Appendix 2* for a summary of the evidence base.

Aims 3 and 4: Enhancing civic pride and engaging the community.
Unlike community planters or in-ground beds, the public would not be able to view, interact with, or directly look after overhead planters. Other schemes might deliver better on this aim.

Monitoring
Regardless of which scheme is progressed, consideration should be given to a monitoring and evaluation process to help ensure effectiveness against the aims and value for money. This might include partnership with a University and/or charity, as Leicester City Council did (Case study: Leicester Bee Roads).

Alternative/Complementary Schemes
DEFRA provides a framework of advice for families, gardeners, farmers, developers, land owners, and local authorities within the 2014-2024 National Pollinator Strategy[4]. This is a useful guide for action.

1. grow more flowers, shrubs, and trees.
2. let your garden grow wild.
3. cut grass less often.
4. don't disturb insect nests and hibernation spots.
5. think carefully about whether to use pesticides.

Alternative ideas should be considered against cost, risk, and benefits/impact.

Further exploration can be conducted on any alternatives e.g.

- Developing new areas of pollinator-friendly in-ground planting
- Developing available unused planters, exploring adoption by community and youth groups or businesses (linking to civic pride and community development)
- Alternative/complementary actions and information campaign to encourage better local practices across the town in line with the proposal's aims and DEFRA's guidance.
- Carrying out further research on one/all/other options and report to a future meeting
- Developing a wider pollinator strategy through some/all the above

Consideration could be given to working up to a full policy/strategy, similar to Leicester City Council's Grassland Strategy: Grassland Strategy 2023-2033 - Bee Roads.

Hannah Jenner
Principal Officer

1 December 2025

Appendices 1 and 2 below.

[4] Bees' Needs: Food and a home - GOV.UK

Appendix 1

I am writing to propose that Blyth Town Council explore the introduction of "bee bus stops" — bus shelters fitted with green roofs planted with pollinator-friendly vegetation. These schemes, already adopted in cities such as Leicester, Derby, Cardiff, and Newcastle, provide multiple benefits:

- Supporting biodiversity – helping bees, butterflies and other pollinators thrive in our urban environment.
- Improving the local environment – green roofs assist with water absorption, reduce urban heat, and enhance air quality.
- Enhancing civic pride – these shelters are highly visible symbols of our commitment to sustainability and environmental responsibility.
- Engaging the community – local schools, residents, and wildlife groups could be involved in planting and maintaining them.

I suggest that Blyth Town Council:
1. Identify several suitable bus shelters for a pilot project.
2. Engage with local environmental organisations such as the Wildlife Trust to advise on planting schemes.
3. Explore funding opportunities through environmental grants, partnerships, or Section 106 contributions.
4. Assess the feasibility of including educational signage to raise awareness of the importance of pollinators.

I believe this initiative would demonstrate leadership, support our climate and biodiversity commitments, and provide a tangible benefit to residents across Blyth. I would be pleased to work with officers and colleagues to bring forward a detailed report and pilot scheme for our town.

A clear positive impact of living bus shelter that fits the proposal's brief is that they educate and inspire people, encouraging the development of further green spaces and more pollinator-friendly practices, both by public bodies such as councils and by the public.

Appendix 2

Northumberland County Council are conducting a review of wilding schemes. It may be helpful to wait for the results of this review.

It may also be helpful request evaluation information on existing schemes e.g. University of Leicester's evaluation of Leicester City Council's scheme, or Newcastle City Council's scheme.

It also appears that living bus shelters work best in certain settings:

a) <u>Densely urban areas</u>
   The claims around mitigating the 'urban heat island' effect (i.e. the ability of planted areas to cool the immediate area) is best seen in those urban areas, which does not fit Blyth's profile.
b) <u>As part of a network of 'insect superhighways'</u>

Living bus shelters work best as part of a wider chain of linked 'pit stops' for flying insects. The fieldwork review in Utrecht found that "bus stops are visited by bees more often when there is a large green area nearby"[5]. Green areas are defined as open environment with green elements, such as trees and shrubs, located within an urban area. It includes parks, football fields, gardens, and allotments.
The Netherlands champions this approach through the 'Honey Highway' scheme (Home - Honey Highway) covering 500,000m^2 and Leicester through its Bee Roads programme started in 2017 with the charity Buglife which has seen 5.5km of wildflower planting along roadsides and roundabouts (Leicester installs bee-friendly bus stops - Cities Today).

Summary of evidence of living bus stops:

a) In the Netherlands, the 2021 Bee Census found that numbers had remained steady that year following a decline since the 1940s[6]. While this has been linked in the media to the scheme established in Utrecht in April 2019 of 316 living bus shelters, the Census covers the whole of the Netherlands (so the outcome is unlikely to be produced by one city), bee numbers have been propped up by urban beekeeping, and the census aims to collect five years' of data before drawing definitive conclusions.
b) Amsterdam rolled out two bus shelters in January 2020. In March 2021, the Ten Years of Wild Bee Policy found a 45% increase in solitary bee species in the city in 2015 compared to 2000[7]. This further suggests that living bus shelters are not a definitive intervention.
c) A fieldwork review of Utrecht bus shelters between May and June 2023 found some roofs attracted no bee visits in the observation period.[8]
d) Planters are too small to calculate an individual ecological footprint. A standard two-bay living shelter would be approximately 2992 x 1634mm (based on one example from The Horizon Group) at 4.89m^2. Large-scale projects have a much greater effect e.g. in Utrecht a proposed project to create a 90 metre tall apartment tower housing 10,000 plants (equivalent 10,000m^2 of forest) is claimed by developers to be capable of absorbing 5.4 tonnes of C02 and producing up to 41 tonnes of oxygen every year[9].
e) Sedums are the only planting option available from suppliers in the UK. Utrecht is experimenting with other wildflower varieties[10] suggesting there may be more effective interventions. Generally, a wider variety of plants will support a wider variety of pollinators.

[5] Bees happy with Utrecht's green bus stop roofs | DUB

[6] Bee population steady in Dutch cities thanks to pollinator strategy | Bees | The Guardian

[7] Bee population steady in Dutch cities thanks to pollinator strategy | Bees | The Guardian

[8] Bees happy with Utrecht's green bus stop roofs | DUB

[9] Encouraging biodiversity in UK cities: Bee Bus Stops and more | LocalGov

[10] Utrecht turned 316 bus stops into bee stops, 'pollinating' other cities

f) In Utrecht, the living bus shelter scheme assisting in creating the favourable conditions for the introduction of the 'No Roof Unused' policy to green the roofs of all the buildings in the city district.[11]

[11] Utrecht rooftops to be 'greened' with plants and mosses in new plan | Netherlands | The Guardian