

BUCHAN AREA BUS FORUM

MINUTES OF MEETING ON WEDNESDAY 28th March 2018

ROOM G1, MINTLAW ACADEMY, MINTLAW

In Attendance

Councillor N. Smith (Aberdeenshire Council) (Chair)

Councillor J. Ingram (Aberdeenshire Council)

Councillor S. Calder (Aberdeenshire Council)

Councillor A. Hassan (Aberdeenshire Council)

Myra McCredie (Mintlaw Community Council & Bus User)

Jeanette Gerrard (Bus User)

Lesley Brown (Bus User)

Jamie Geddes (Bus User)

Jean Street (Bus User)

Ann Seward (Bus User)

Daniel Laird (Commercial Director, Stagecoach North Scotland)

Ryan Norbury (Stagecoach North Scotland)

Neil Stewart (Principal Officer, Passenger Transport Unit, Aberdeenshire Council)

Susan Watt (Senior Transport Officer, Passenger Transport Unit, Aberdeenshire Council)

Claire Marshall (Transport Officer, Passenger Transport Unit, Aberdeenshire Council)

Apologies

Julie Pickering (Crimond Area Tenants and Residents Association)

Jim Pickering (Crimond Area Tenants and Residents Association)

John Temple (Bus User)

Joyce Clark (Bus User)

Mrs Fyfe (Bus User)

Mrs Whyte (Bus User)

1. Welcome and Introduction

Councillor Smith welcomed everyone to the meeting and introductions were given.

2. Minutes of Meeting on 6th September 2017

The Minutes were approved.

3. Matters arising from the Minutes

Neil Stewart provided the following update on behalf of Aberdeenshire Council:

- 3.1 In response to the request for Service 84 (Peterhead Chapel Street – Inverugie Court) to be rerouted to allow Inverugie Court passengers direct access to Lidl and Home Bargains, he confirmed that Stagecoach Bluebird agreed to this at no additional cost to the Council as of 8th January 2018, with all journeys between 0830 hours – 1700 hours (Monday to Saturday) extended, providing four daily return journeys.

3.2 In response to the request for the 0900 hours ex Banff – Fraserburgh (Service 272) to revert to its previous departure time of 0855 hours, he confirmed that this was implemented as of 8th January 2018, in addition to the Service 35 (Aberdeen – Banff) connecting journey being brought forward by 5 minutes.

3.3 In response to Councillor Smith's request for the provision of a bus shelter at the eastbound bus stop at the golf course in Longside, he confirmed that this had been installed today.

In response to a claim from the floor that the bus stop was not used, Councillor Smith confirmed that the bus shelter request had come from himself and the bus stop was well-used by local residents.

3.4 In regards to Ellon Park & Ride, he confirmed that now that drainage issues had been resolved, the works required for Phase 2 had gone out to tender and are due to be awarded in May, with the hope that Phase 2 will be completed by the end of this year.

3.5 In response to the request for the opening hours of Ellon Park & Ride to be extended, he confirmed that this would not be possible as this would require an extra member of staff, for which there are unfortunately no funds available.

Daniel Laird provided the following update on behalf of Stagecoach Bluebird:

3.6 In response to the claim that the 1720 hours ex Aberdeen – Peterhead (Service 63) did not operate on 25th August 2017, he confirmed that having looked at the tracking of the vehicle, it did appear to operate, with tickets being sold at the stance from 1712 hours until 1720 hours, and further tickets being sold on Union Street.

3.7 In response to the claim that both the interior and exterior of Service 66/66A (Peterhead – Stuartfield) buses are unclean and that the buses are noisy, he confirmed that this should improve having appointed a new engineering manager covering the Peterhead and Fraserburgh depots.

He confirmed that there are older buses on the route but unfortunately the company is unable to fund newer ones at the moment due to financial pressures, including reduced contracted bus work from the Council. However, he advised that the oldest vehicles will gradually be replaced.

3.8 In response to the request for the routing of Service 66/66A (Peterhead – Stuartfield) via Torterston to be withdrawn due to low passenger demand, he advised that the actual usage makes the routing viable, so there will be no changes.

3.9 In response to Councillor Smith's request for improved connections at Mintlaw Interchange with mainline services to/from Aberdeen, he confirmed that the timetable wasn't ideal and this would be investigated at the next service review. He also confirmed that feedback received from staff at the company's depot has indicated that the allocated journey time between Longside and Mintlaw can be reduced by 5 minutes, so that will be taken into account in the review.

3.10 In response to the request for the rerouting of the early a.m. peak journeys from Fraserburgh – Aberdeen (Service 67/68) to operate via Strichen instead of New Leeds, he confirmed that this would not be fulfilled due to existing passenger demand within the Fraserburgh - New Leeds section.

- 3.11 In response to the request for Service 67/68 (Fraserburgh – Aberdeen) journeys to serve Ellon town centre on Sundays, he confirmed that this was fulfilled as of 8th January 2018.
- 3.12 In response to the query as to the company’s procedures regarding the length of time passengers should wait for a service to resume when a vehicle breaks down, he confirmed that there is no standard time period but rather the company will aim to get the journey running again as soon as possible. He confirmed that the incident involving a replacement bus not being available for almost 2 hours was not acceptable and that they have improved their procedures since then.

The following points were raised from the floor in regards to the Minutes from 6th September 2017:

- 3.13 In response to the comment made by William Mainus that *Buchan Xpress* vehicles would be withdrawn from Service 66/66A (Peterhead – Stuartfield) corridor, it was raised that one operated on 20th March 2018 at approximately 1345 hours.

Daniel Laird confirmed that the vehicles will not be allocated to the service as a norm, but may still be used in emergency situations to ensure the journey is covered e.g. a vehicle breakdown.

- 3.14 Councillor Ingram queried the current concessionary fares reimbursement rate paid to bus operators by the government, as he thought it was around 80% a few years ago.

Daniel Laird confirmed that the current reimbursement rate is considerably lower, at 56.9%, and will drop to 56.8% from 1st April 2018. He advised that the Scheme is also budget capped at approximately £200 million, which means if the cap is hit, operators risk not being paid for the remainder of the year. He confirmed that the recent severe weather, referred to as the “Beast from the East” had suppressed passenger figures so much across the country that the cap will not be hit this year.

(For information, bus operators should be no better or worse off as a result of participating in the Scottish Government’s National Bus Travel Concession Scheme for Older and Disabled Persons).

4. Stagecoach Bluebird Update

Daniel Laird provided the following update:

- 4.1 The company have just completed the roll out of new ticket machines, which will be more reliable, provide better Real-Time information to the app and screens at bus, and provide the ability to make contactless payments. It is anticipated that this will be a great benefit to passengers and drivers by speeding up the boarding process.
- 4.2 There will be a revision to fares as of the 2nd April 2018, with all the information being available online, in addition to a new “Fares & Ticketing” leaflet being produced.

- 4.3 There will be a number of knock-on effects in response to the changes to contracts withdrawn or varied by Aberdeenshire Council, as follows:

Service 67/68 (Aberdeen – Fraserburgh via Mintlaw)

- On weekdays an additional 0905 hours Service X67 from Ellon to Fraserburgh will replace the 1120 hours positional Service X67 journey from Aberdeen to Fraserburgh that will be withdrawn.
- The 1610 hours ex Fraserburgh to Aberdeen is retimed by 5 minutes to improve reliability.
- In January a positional journey was added from Aberdeen to Fraserburgh at 0555 hours, with a return trip at 2245 hours. However, with the loss of the 252 service (see 5.2 below), these will be withdrawn.

Service 69 (Fraserburgh – Peterhead)

- The weekday 0840 hours Service 69B from Fraserburgh to Peterhead will be withdrawn and replaced with a journey at 1005 hours (the 0840 hours was effectively only an additional positional journey).

Service 74 (Fraserburgh – Rosehearty) (Note: Banff and Buchan Area)

- On weekdays, the 0947 hours and 1047 hours departing Fraserburgh, and their return journeys, will operate 15 minutes later.

Service 76/77 (Fraserburgh – Buchan Road Circular) (Note: Banff and Buchan Area)

- The 1505 hours Service 77 will operate during School holidays only. The 1535 hours Service 76 and the timetable for the remainder of the peak period will be retarded to operate 15 minutes later.

Service 78 (Fraserburgh Local Tesco – Buchan Road Circular) (Note: Banff and Buchan Area)

- On weekdays, the 1019 hours will operate 15 minutes later.

Service 252 (Fraserburgh – New Deer)

- Contracted service and associated positional journeys will be withdrawn (see 5.2 below).

Service 270 (Fraserburgh – New Pitsligo)

- The 0620 hours on weekdays will operate 10 minutes later to improve a connection with a peak departure from Fraserburgh to Aberdeen. The 1740 hours ex Fraserburgh will be retarded to depart at 1805 hours.

5. **Aberdeenshire Council Update**

Neil Stewart provided the following update:

- 5.1 Coinciding with commercial service changes on 8th January 2018, the Tuesday and Friday return journeys on Service 253 (Turriff – New Deer – Fraserburgh) were rerouted via A90 (Rathen) instead of B9033 (St Combs) to provide faster journeys and additional time in Fraserburgh.
- 5.2 For the second consecutive year, a review of Council supported Local Bus Services was required to ensure that expenditure on socially necessary bus services did not exceed the Budget allocation for the forthcoming financial year, with a predicted shortfall in the 2018/19 Budget of approximately £200,000.

The review resulted in the withdrawal of Service 252 (New Deer – Mintlaw – Fraserburgh North East Scotland College) with effect from 7th May 2018, but measures have been taken to mitigate against this, with the Central Buchan A2B dial-a-bus service being extended to commence 30 minutes earlier at 0730 hours (Monday to Friday) to enable those travelling on the New Deer - Mintlaw leg of the journey to connect with the Stagecoach 0816 hours ex Mintlaw – Fraserburgh (Service 67). The Council will also be contacting the college to see if there are any spaces available on the dedicated transport which operates from Inverurie to the college via Mintlaw.

The withdrawal of Service 252 will result in net savings of approximately £40,000 per year.

6. Bus Service Requests / Development

Neil Stewart referred to the papers circulated, and confirmed that all pending and fulfilled requests had been discussed. He welcomed any service requests from the floor.

- 6.1 Councillor Ingram stated how valuable the Central Buchan A2B dial-a-bus service is for its users and requested that the service be extended southwards to serve the Ardallie/Toll of Birness area.

Susan Watt confirmed that, whilst this request would be forwarded to colleagues managing the A2B dial-a-bus services, Central Buchan A2B is well utilised and is operated by 3 vehicles, so any extension to the geographical area served would probably result in an additional vehicle being required, at additional cost which cannot be borne by the Council.

- 6.2 Request for the new ALDI store on Kirk Street/West Road (Peterhead) to be served by Service 66/66A (Peterhead – Stuartfield) once completed.

Daniel Laird confirmed that this would be considered.

7. Public Transport Infrastructure / Information

- 7.1 Councillor Calder requested the provision of bus stops at the Buchan Gateway Retail Park, which is currently served by buses on a hail and ride basis buses, highlighting that the retail park continues to increase in size and it is important to have a safe place for buses to stop.

He also advised that there is a further new development being built south of the Invernettie Roundabout, which includes a hotel, and this will also require bus stops.

Neil Stewart confirmed that he was aware that bus stops had been requested at this location in the past and that these had been ruled out, but he couldn't remember why. He agreed to discuss these requests with colleagues in the PTU's Infrastructure team.

[For information, these requests relate to the A90 trunk road, therefore the request will be passed to Transport Scotland and there is likely to be an extensive period before a decision can be made].

- 7.2 Councillor Ingram requested the provision of a bus shelter on High Street (New Pitsligo) adjacent to the Royal British Legion near Church Street.

Neil Stewart confirmed that this would be investigated. (Office Use: Stop number 20307.01)

- 7.3 Query whether Real-Time screens can display information during bad weather to inform passengers whether the service/journeys are operating, with particular reference to the recent weather conditions in early March 2018.

Daniel Laird and Neil Stewart confirmed that discussions would be held between the two parties to see if this is feasible.

- 7.4 Request for provision of a bus shelter outside Peterhead Prison Museum, highlighting that the popularity of the museum had increased passenger numbers utilising the bus stop.

8. Service 66/66A (Peterhead – Stuartfield)

- 8.1 Councillor Ingram reported that he had received complaints that the service had been rerouted from Mintlaw roundabout via A952 and the unclassified “Knock” road to Stuartfield, thereby omitting the route via Station Road (Mintlaw). He queried whether this was because the vehicles had issues operating round the square in Stuartfield or whether it was due to a previous road closure and drivers had not been instructed accordingly.

Daniel Laird confirmed that this should only be happening if there is a road closure preventing buses from using the regular registered route and agreed to investigate this and arrange for drivers to be reminded.

- 8.2 Request for the 2 hour gap in the inter-peak service to be filled, highlighting that patronage may have decreased due to passengers having to wait longer in Peterhead to return home.

Daniel Laird confirmed that there are no changes planned to the service at this time.

Neil Stewart confirmed that the journeys actually run every 90 minutes up until around 2-3pm.

- 8.3 Repeated claim regarding “unsuitable” and older vehicles being allocated to the corridor, with particular reference to a bus which has a torn seat and holes in the door.

It was correctly asserted that the previous Managing Director of Stagecoach North Scotland, had assured passengers at this particular Area Bus Forum approximately 2 years ago that this vehicle would be removed from the corridor.

Daniel Laird confirmed that this would be investigated and advised that an alternative vehicle might become available as a result of the Council withdrawing contracted services/journeys.

9. Service 60/61/63 (Aberdeen – Ellon – Peterhead)

- 9.1 Query as to why low floor buses, rather than *Buchan Xpress* coaches, are now allocated to certain journeys on these routes, in particular the 0630 hours ex Peterhead - Aberdeen (Monday to Friday), coupled with a claim that they are prone to breakdowns and also overheat, with particular reference to a recent occasion when a low floor bus went on fire. It was further claimed that these buses have broken down 3 times recently (no dates provided) and there is insufficient seating capacity, resulting in passengers having to stand on route sections to/from Aberdeen.

Daniel Laird confirmed that following the service changes on 8th January, there were more low floor buses allocated to the route than he would like to see, but this is currently being resolved and changes will be implemented on 7th May, allowing for more coaches to be re-allocated to the route. He also confirmed that he was aware of the fire and it was an isolated incident dealt with efficiently by the driver and no passengers were involved.

10. Service 67/68 (Fraserburgh – Aberdeen)

- 10.1 Councillor Ingram requested that consideration be given to rerouting journeys via New Pitsligo, due to the lack of bus services available there.

Daniel Laird confirmed that this would be considered in the next service review.

- 10.2 Claim regarding insufficient seating capacity during the am peak due to low floor vehicles being allocated to the route, resulting in the bus leaving Mintlaw with no seating capacity available and passengers having to stand.

Daniel Laird confirmed that this would be accounted for in the review of vehicle allocations.

- 10.3 A request was received for the journeys operated by a low floor bus to be advertised on the company's publicity to allow those unable to access the *Buchan Xpress* vehicles to access public transport.

Daniel Laird confirmed that, whilst this will be considered, it is difficult to guarantee low floor vehicles on individual journeys as this may change on the day. He also referred to the aforementioned vehicle allocation review and confirmed that the majority of passengers prefer the coaches on long distance services.

11. Service 51 (Fraserburgh – New Pitsligo – Ellon)

- 11.1 Councillor Ingram queried as to whether there are any upcoming changes to this service.

Neil Stewart confirmed that there were no planned changes.

12. Buchan Xpress vehicles

- 12.1 Councillor Calder raised the matter of accessibility problems on the *Buchan Xpress* Coaches, with particular reference to those with a walking disability and mothers with young children, highlighting that the vehicles need to be accessible to all passengers. He confirmed that he has been unable to travel to/from Council locations to attend meetings as the two seats downstairs have been occupied, resulting in him having to skype into meetings. He also felt that it was unfair that it was at the discretion of the driver as to whether passengers are entitled to sit in the two downstairs seats.

Neil Stewart confirmed that following the meeting held in Mintlaw in 2016 to allow members of the public to discuss this subject with Stagecoach senior management, the company undertook modifications to the vehicles to increase the number of bell pushes and grab rails and modify the stairwells, as well as improving the safety of the area near the toilet area. This has improved access for some passengers. He explained that Daniel Laird was not with the company when the investment in these vehicles was undertaken.

Daniel Laird acknowledged his awareness of the issues raised and confirmed that the company could not go any further than the action taken since the aforementioned meeting.

- 12.2 Claim that a passenger had to wait 2 hours before she could travel, as she was unable to access either of the two seats downstairs on a *Buchan Xpress* coach resulting in her having to wait for the next available bus. It was also claimed that passengers have stopped using the service because they can't access the buses.

Daniel Laird confirmed that it is not possible to provide an accurate report of passengers with a disability utilising the service, however the use of concessionary passes (National Entitlement Cards) increased on the corridor after vehicles were introduced and has continued to increase since the modifications were made to the vehicles.

- 12.3 Councillor Ingram acknowledged that the *Buchan Xpress* vehicles are comfortable and popular with able bodied passengers, however less able bodied passengers and mothers with children find it difficult to access them. He claimed that the vehicles are not DDA (Disability Discrimination Act) compliant, as only 2 seats are provided downstairs instead of 4 seats. He also confirmed that he has contacted the Traffic Commissioner to raise the matter but this has not been taken forward, so he will now raise it with the Transport Minister.

Daniel Laird confirmed that the vehicles are DDA compliant and that they comply with all Public Service Vehicle Accessibility Regulations (PSVAR 2000).

- 12.4 Councillor Calder raised the issue that if passengers wish to alight at a rural location where there are no fixed bus stops, then they can't rely on pressing the bell to inform the driver in time to alight at the desired location.

Daniel Laird advised that passengers inform the driver upon boarding the vehicle, whilst acknowledging that rural locations can be difficult to describe.

- 12.5 Councillor Calder confirmed his understanding that the *Buchan Xpress* vehicles have a lifespan of around 12 years and queried whether there were more suitable vehicles available for the corridor.

Daniel Laird confirmed that unfortunately there is no one particular bus/coach which meets the needs of everyone and this can be an issue within the bus industry. However, he advised that one of the Stagecoach companies is currently trialling a new style of coach in the Fife & Edinburgh areas, these vehicles having up to 10 seats downstairs but the total seating capacity is only 53 seats for a 14 metre length vehicle. He also confirmed that it is possible that one of these vehicles could be loaned to Stagecoach North Scotland for trial on the Banff, Buchan and Deeside corridors and, if so, the company would be seeking feedback from passengers.

- 12.6 Complaint that the two downstairs seats are very close to the driver's seat, resulting in insufficient leg room for passengers, making for uncomfortable travel.

Daniel Laird acknowledged the complaint but confirmed that it is not possible to change the layout of the seating area downstairs.

- 12.7 Query as to whether alternative double decker buses could be allocated to the corridor, which would provide sufficient seating downstairs for those unable to use the upper deck.

Daniel Laird confirmed that this type of vehicle is not suitable for long distance corridors and passenger feedback backs this up.

13. A.O.B

- 13.1 Councillor Ingram requested that a column be added to the financial spreadsheet handout, showing the average number of passengers per journey, highlighting that claims had been made at the Forum that there is extremely limited demand to/from the Stuartfield – Maud section of Service 66/66A (Maud/Stuartfield – Peterhead) and this could be catered for by Central Buchan A2B dial-a-bus instead.

Neil Stewart confirmed that an additional column would be added, however it would only be figures for the subsidised journeys or part journeys, as the remainder will be commercial. Regarding Councillor Ingram's suggestion regarding Service 66/66A, he explained that the daytime journeys are operated on a commercial basis so any decision to amend these would be up to the company. He added that Stagecoach Bluebird extended certain journeys to/from Maud in response to passenger requests, at marginal additional cost, and removing this section would unlikely result in substantial savings and/or allow for additional journeys between Mintlaw and Peterhead.

- 13.2 Query as to whether passengers still had to book a day in advance to travel on the Central Buchan A2B dial-a-bus.

Neil Stewart confirmed that this was normally the minimum notice required.

(For information it can be up to one week in advance, but a fortnight in the case of medical appointments. Occasionally same day bookings can be taken in exceptional circumstances if there is enough capacity).

- 13.3 Query as to whether the age of eligibility is being raised for the Scottish Government's National Bus Travel Concession Scheme for Older and Disabled Persons.

Daniel Laird confirmed that consultation was carried out last year looking at the possibility of raising the minimum age of eligibility, whilst at the same time including Modern Apprentices. However, the net cost of revising the Scheme proved unaffordable and was therefore put on hold, possibly until 2019/2020.

- 13.4 Query as to when the next batch of new timetables for the area will be issued.

Daniel Laird confirmed there would be new timetables for the 7th May 2018 service changes.

14. Date and Venue of Next Meeting

Councillor Smith confirmed that the next meeting of the Forum would take place in Mintlaw in autumn 2018. Further details will be advised in due course.