

GARIOCH AREA BUS FORUM

MINUTES OF MEETING ON THURSDAY 22ND MARCH 2018

STAFF ROOM, WESTHILL ACADEMY, WESTHILL

In Attendance

Councillor F. Hood (Aberdeenshire Council) (Chair)

Councillor I. Walker (Aberdeenshire Council)

Ian Young (Newmachar Community Council)

Pam Young (Newmachar Community Council)

Margaret Basley (Kemnay Community Council)

Sheila Gray (Kintore Community Council)

Ann Marston (Kintore Community Council)

Neil Peace (Bus User)

Sandra Coutts (Bus User)

John McGregor (Bus User)

Margaret McGregor (Bus User)

Jean Paterson (Bus User)

David Fraser (Bus User)

Sheila Calder (Bus User)

Madge McGinley (Bus User)

Gladys Duguid (Bus User)

Bunty Keith (Bus User)

Mark Whitelocks (Managing Director, 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

Councillor M. Ford (Aberdeenshire Council)

Raymond Swaffield (Westhill and Elrick Community Council)

James Cowe (Bus User)

Alec Keith (Bus User)

Brian Fraser (Bus User)

Evelyn Fraser (Bus User)

1. Welcome and Introduction

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

2. Minutes of Meeting on 30th August 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 regards to the request to review the times and routes of Service 777 (Oldmeldrum – Westhill – Aberdeen Airport), he confirmed that there are only minor changes planned to come into force from 8th May 2018, with the route being altered slightly within Westhill, operating via Endeavour Drive, Prospect Road and B9119, in order to serve the industrial estate in response to passenger requests. He also confirmed that although the service operates a rather convoluted route, it is used with people travelling on each section.

3.2 In response to the request for bus stop road markings to be repainted and to look at the safety of the raised kerb at the bus stop outside the Co-op in Kintore, he confirmed that the markings have been repainted, and the kerbs had been checked with no sign of any defects.

It was raised from the floor that the issue was that the bus can't stop at the raised kerb due to parked vehicles around the bus stop, resulting in it being inaccessible for the bus.

Neil Stewart confirmed he would take on board the comments, however this was a difficult issue to progress.

3.3 In response to the claim that the Real Time screen at Kemnay Interchange is still having issues, he confirmed that the Council is aware there are on-going issues with scheduled arrivals dropping off the screen and is working with suppliers and operators to improve tracking.

Mark Whitelocks confirmed that ticket machines have been upgraded, which contributes to improved tracking, with approximately 96% of Stagecoach Bluebird journeys being successfully tracked. He confirmed that journeys with live tracking will show as for example "3 minutes" but if a journey isn't tracking, it will show as for example "18:00".

Councillor Hood asked the floor to report any further issues to the Passenger Transport Unit.

3.4 In response to the request from Councillor Smith for the provision of a bus layby on the A96 at Colpy road end (northbound) for Service 10 (Aberdeen – Huntly – Elgin) coaches to pull off the road to allow passengers to board and alight, he confirmed that a response is still awaited from Transport Scotland and he would provide an update when available.

3.5 In response to the request for provision of a bus stop and shelter behind His Majesty's Theatre (Aberdeen), he confirmed that this request had been passed to Aberdeen City Council but he was unsure as to the outcome of it.

There was discussion from the floor as to the exact location of where this request referred to, and Neil Stewart confirmed that the person who requested it spoke to Aberdeen City Council directly therefore he was sure they would be aware.

3.6 The request to reroute Service 218 (Aberdeen – Alford) via Union Street in Aberdeen was fulfilled with effect from 8th January 2018.

- 3.7 In response to the request for Service 218 (Aberdeen – Alford) to operate via Straik Road or Old Skene Road (Westhill) to reduce the journey time between Alford and Westhill, the service was rerouted via Straik Road on 8th January 2018.

However, he confirmed that some passengers who want to access the shops at Westhill have asked that the service be rerouted via Straik Road, Wellgrove Road, Old Skene Road and Westhill Drive to A944, so this will be fulfilled as from 7th May 2018.

Councillor Walker confirmed that she had received positive feedback on the 7th May proposal.

Mark Whitelocks provided the following update on behalf of Stagecoach Bluebird:

- 3.8 In response to the claim that “Megabus” type vehicles were being allocated to the Service X20/420 corridor, he confirmed these types of bus were no longer allocated to those runs.
- 3.9 In response to the repeated claim regarding frequent late running of the 1705 hours ex Aberdeen – Kemnay (Service 420), he confirmed that this journey had been retimed to depart at 1715 hours as of 8th January 2018 and he was not aware of any further issues.

Claim from the floor that the journey still operates late, with the assertion that the journey arrived in Kemnay at 1823 hours (14 minutes late) on the day of this meeting.

Mark Whitelocks confirmed that this would be monitored.

- 3.10 In response to the claim that the 0532 hours ex Alford – Aberdeen on 29th August 2017 arrived 13 minutes late in Monymusk, he confirmed that the bus had left the depot late and apologised for this.
- 3.11 In response to the use of hydrogen buses on the Service 37 (Aberdeen – Inverurie) corridor, he confirmed that this matter is being looked into, highlighting that these vehicles are allocated to the corridor from time to time to help keep operating costs down and cover breakdowns.
- 3.12 In response to the claim of the non-running of journeys via Kintore between 1600 hours and 1630 hours on 25th August 2017, he confirmed that the journeys *did* serve Kintore, but operated late.

It was raised from the floor that, at times, drivers miss out Kintore or Blackburn, claiming that recently a driver on Service 37, heading towards Kintore, asked passengers if anyone was going to Kintore, with the intention of bypassing Kintore if nobody was travelling there.

Mark Whitelocks requested dates and times to enable investigation into this, however he would ensure a general instruction was issued to drivers.

It was raised from the floor that this matter is the subject of several complaints to Stagecoach Customer Services but no responses are received.

Councillor Hood suggested that in future, passengers could copy in a member of the Passenger Transport Unit to their email so they are aware of the matter.

It was raised from the floor that Twitter is a good method to get in touch with Stagecoach Bluebird.

4. Stagecoach Bluebird Update

Mark Whitelocks provided the following update:

- 4.1 A number of service changes affecting the Garioch Area came into place on 8th January 2018, as follows:
- Service X17 (Aberdeen – Westhill) had some changes to improve punctuality, however further changes are still required and will come into place on 7th May 2018.
 - Service 37 (Aberdeen – Inverurie) operates every 30 minutes between Aberdeen, Kintore and Blackburn, with only one journey an hour between Inverurie - Kintore - Blackburn.
 - Service 10 (Aberdeen – Inverness) was suffering some overloading issues, hence the increase in Service X37 (Aberdeen – Inverurie direct) journeys.
 - Service 35A (Aberdeen – Oldmeldrum) was withdrawn due to limited passenger demand (average of 6 passengers per journey).
- 4.2 On 7th May 2018 there are further service changes planned, as a knock-on effect of the variation/withdrawal of Council subsidised journeys.
- Service X17 (Aberdeen – Westhill) will have some journeys retimed.
 - An evening return journey on Service 37 (Aberdeen – Inverurie) will be withdrawn.

5. Aberdeenshire Council Update

Neil Stewart provided the following update:

- 5.1 On 8th January 2018, a number of changes were made to Council subsidised journeys in response to the Stagecoach Bluebird commercial service revisions.
- Due to the withdrawal of the commercial 1730 hours ex Aberdeen – Monymusk (Service X20), the subsidised 1705 hours ex Aberdeen – Kemnay was retimed to 1715 hours (Service 420) to lessen the gap in departure times. Stagecoach Bluebird extended the journey beyond Kemnay to terminate at Alford via Monymusk.
 - 1745 hours ex Inverurie – Alford (Service 421) was retimed to depart at 1755 hours to connect with Service 420 (Aberdeen – Kemnay) departing Aberdeen at the new time of 1715 hours.

Query from the floor as to whether the journeys *do* connect.

Neil Stewart confirmed that following requests both journeys were re-timed to allow passengers to travel on both journeys and there have been no reports to suggest this was not happening.

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 following 4 services being affected in the Garioch area, with changes to be implemented on 7th May 2018 as follows:

- Service 220 (Westhill/Elrick/Kirkton of Skene – Aberdeen Royal Infirmary) will be fully withdrawn, with a low passenger demand of an average of less than 2 passengers per journey. This will result in Hilltop Turning Circle and Hillside Road (Westhill) being no longer served by a fixed route bus service. Westhill A2B can provide alternative links within the town and Kirkton of Skene continues to be served by both Westhill A2B and Service 218 (Alford – Westhill – Aberdeen). In terms of Westhill passengers accessing Aberdeen Royal Infirmary (ARI), they will need to change buses at Kingswells Park & Ride, with either Service 218 or Aberdeen City services 94/X94.

It was raised by Councillor Walker that the first journey on Service 94 (Kingswells Park & Ride to ARI) departs Kingswells Park and Ride at 1028 hours, and Service 218 departs at 0720 and 1039 hours, resulting in a 2 hour gap in the morning.

Neil Stewart acknowledged this and advised that passengers can also travel on Service X17 (Westhill – Aberdeen), then connect in the City Centre with Stagecoach services 10, 35, 37, X37, and 59, to ARI.

- Service X17 (Aberdeen – Westhill) will have two Sunday evening journeys withdrawn. There is an average of 7 passengers per journey and the withdrawal effectively reduces the level of service on Sunday evenings from approximately half-hourly to approximately every 45 minutes.
- Service 41A (Huntly – Inverurie) will be withdrawn on non-school days (Monday to Friday). Surveys show 2 regular passengers travelling between Inch/Huntly and Pitcaple/Huntly. There are no bus alternatives, except from Huntly to Pitcaple in the afternoon. For information there are rail alternatives between Inch and Huntly. Journeys operating on schooldays only will, of course, continue to run to/from Gordon Schools.

Councillor Hood queried whether a press release would be given with all this information.

Neil Stewart confirmed that one had been distributed the week before, and agreed publicise this again nearer the implementation date of 7th May.

Susan Watt confirmed that notices would be displayed on board affected bus services.

6. Bus Service Requests / Development

Neil Stewart referred to the papers circulated, detailing pending and fulfilled service requests in the Garioch Area, all of which had already been discussed during the meeting.

7. Public Transport Infrastructure / Information

Neil Stewart welcomed any comments or requests relating to public transport infrastructure or information from the floor.

- 7.1 Councillor Walker highlighted the issue that there is a temporary bus stop at Strawberry Field Road (on Broadstraik Brae, Westhill) which has no lighting or a base of hardstanding.

It was confirmed after the meeting that the temporary stop was put in place due to the rerouting of Service X17 on 8th January 2018. Due to the time of year, the Local Roads team did not have spare capacity to carry out the necessary base works, mainly due to the winter maintenance programme. The situation will remain unchanged until the winter programme has been completed.

8. Service 37 (Aberdeen - Inverurie)

- 8.1 Request for the half hourly service from Kintore to Inverurie to be re-instated.

Mark Whitelocks confirmed that monitoring of the corridor shows there is higher passenger demand for direct travel between Inverurie and Aberdeen and there is a need to provide a faster service to attract passengers. He confirmed that there are no plans to make significant changes to the services in the foreseeable future, however comments raised would be considered in the next review.

- 8.2 Request for additional journeys between Kintore and Aberdeen to bridge the gap between 1530 and 1634 ex Kintore (Monday to Friday).

Mark Whitelocks confirmed that this would be considered at the next review.

- 8.3 Claim that there is an increase in passengers alighting on the A96 to walk to Kintore due to the reduction in buses serving the village, resulting in passengers deciding to cross the dual carriageway.

Mark Whitelocks confirmed that unfortunately the Company had to make difficult decisions but they would continue to monitor the corridor.

- 8.4 Claim that passengers were not consulted prior to the revision on 8th January 2018, in particular at the last Garioch Area Bus Forum.

Neil Stewart confirmed that it was perhaps too early at the last Forum meeting to consult, whilst Mark Whitelocks confirmed that public consultation had been undertaken by Stagecoach.

- 8.5 It was raised from the floor that Service 37 journeys terminate at The Square (Kintore) instead of at the north end of the town (at Lochburn Drive), despite the bus travelling north to turn at the roundabout to face the right direction for the return journey to Aberdeen.

It was also raised that there is no publicity at the 3 bus stops on the above section of route and that, despite receiving an email from Stagecoach Bluebird confirming that they would resolve the issue with new driver boards being issued, this matter has not been rectified.

Mark Whitelocks confirmed that the possibility of registering this section of route, for use by the travelling public, would be investigated.

- 8.6 Claim that drivers often don't pick-up passengers waiting at the northbound bus stop on A96, just before Broomhill Roundabout, as the driver is already in the offside lane preparing to turn right into Kintore.

Mark Whitelocks confirmed that the driver should wait until he is sure that there are no passengers waiting at the bus stop before changing lanes and instructions will be issued to drivers accordingly.

- 8.7 Councillor Hood raised the issue of buses stopping on the slip road, on a bend at Kintore, prior to the garage to change over drivers, resulting in a potential safety issue for traffic trying to overtake. He confirmed that the area opposite the garage had recently been designated a no parking area yet a car is stationed there at around 1100 hours and between 1400 – 1500 hours to allow drivers to change over.

Mark Whitelocks confirmed that this would be investigated and a safer area identified.

- 8.8 Claim from the floor that on 1st March 2018 a passenger took the 0700 hours ex Kintore – Aberdeen to ARI, then returned on the 1003 ex ARI – Kintore, however was informed by the driver that the bus could not serve Kintore due to the snow, which resulted in the passenger asking a friend for a lift for the remainder of the journey. Again this was coupled with a claim that an email had been sent to the company but no reply has been received.

Mark Whitelocks confirmed that this would be investigated, highlighting that the snow was particularly bad that day. He asked if the passenger could provide their name and contact details after the meeting.

- 8.9 Claim that the new timetable for Services 37/X37 is too confusing for some passengers.

Mark Whitelocks confirmed that this matter would be investigated.

- 8.10 Neil Stewart raised 3 issues that a passenger had asked him to mention at the meeting:

- Buses on Service 37 often have steep steps and those with limited mobility have difficulty getting on/off the bus
- Some drivers go past the raised kerbs in Inverurie (Service 37) making it more difficult to board/alight
- On Market Place, the bus (Service 37) often stops too far away from the kerb so there is a gap between the kerb and the bus, also causing difficulty boarding/alighting.

Mark Whitelocks confirmed that there are some coaches allocated to a few trips on the service and that the configuration of the raised kerbs in some areas does not make it possible for certain types of vehicle to stop there.

Neil Stewart advised that the raised boarding kerbs have been there for a considerable time and that they are expensive to replace. He suggested that it is the design of the doors on certain vehicles that makes this manoeuvre difficult.

9. Service 10 (Aberdeen - Inverness)

9.1 Request to re-route journeys via Blackburn.

Mark Whitelocks confirmed that this would not be possible as some journeys, particularly during the peak periods are already experiencing capacity issues, hence the Service X37 being introduced to provide additional capacity between Aberdeen and Inverurie.

9.2 Complaint regarding the long journey times on the corridor, suggesting that too many villages are served in the Moray and Highland areas.

Mark Whitelocks confirmed that the service cannot compete with the journey times of train journeys, and that there is a need to serve these villages, as they would not be served otherwise, partly due to supported service cuts in these areas.

9.3 Claim regarding insufficient seating capacity provided on Service 10 from Aberdeen, in particular at peak times, due to passengers boarding and alighting within the City, resulting in longer distance passengers being left stranded along the route.

Mark Whitelocks confirmed that the services is registered to pick up and set down at all bus stops and there are no plans to implement such restrictions, as City passengers contribute to the commercial viability and level of service provided.

10. Service 35 (Aberdeen - Elgin)

10.1 Claim regarding the frequency of breakdowns and late running, in particular on 20th March 2018 when it was claimed that the 1018 hours ex Banff – Aberdeen arrived over 35 minutes late in Newmachar (due 1131 hours), after the 0900 hours ex Elgin – Aberdeen (due Newmachar 1201 hours) had arrived.

Mark Whitelocks confirmed that this would be investigated.

10.2 Claim that frequent late running and/or breakdowns are resulting in insufficient seats being available at Newmachar and passengers often have to wait for up to an hour.

Mark Whitelocks confirmed that this would be investigated.

10.3 Repeated request for a departure leaving Aberdeen at 2230 hours for those attending His Majesty's Theatre (HMT), highlighting that currently buses operate from Aberdeen at 2005 hours, 2135 hours and 2325 hours, leaving a gap of almost 2 hours.

Mark Whitelocks confirmed that the driver of the 2135 hours departure is at the end of his working shift so it would be difficult to change the departure time. However, he confirmed that the timing and usage of the last 3 departures would be reviewed.

11. Service 220 (Westhill – Aberdeen Royal Infirmary)

11.1 Councillor Walker expressed her disappointment that the service was being withdrawn.

12. Other Matters

- 12.1 Claim from the floor that nobody ever answers the Stagecoach Customer Services phone number.

Mark Whitelocks confirmed that the number for Union Square is 01224 591381.

- 12.2 Councillor Walker gave thanks to Neil Stewart and to Graeme Leslie of Stagecoach Bluebird, for providing quick responses to her emails regarding various local bus service matters.

- 12.3 Claim that the Stagecoach Bus App does not always provide accurate times, showing scheduled rather than live times. The passenger agreed to show Mark Whitelocks screenshots of this after the meeting.

- 12.4 Query from the floor as to what the diversion route was for the upcoming road closure on Victoria Terrace, Kemnay.

Claire Marshall confirmed that Stagecoach buses would be following the official diversion route recommended by Aberdeenshire Council via Fyfe Park, and that the six bus stops on Victoria Terrace would not be served for the duration of the closure.

- 12.5 Query from the floor as to what stops an independent bus company operating from Aberdeen to Inverness.

Mark Whitelocks confirmed any bus operator can register to operate along this route, as long as they have a PSV (Public Service Vehicle) Operator's Licence.

- 12.6 It was raised from the floor that recently a passenger boarded a bus with a dog. The driver then got up and asked if anyone on the bus was allergic to dogs and as nobody was, they were allowed to board. It was therefore queried that if another passenger had said they were allergic, would the passenger with the dog have been refused travel?

Mark Whitelocks confirmed that common sense should have prevailed and the passenger with the dog should have still been allowed to board the vehicle and make their journey.

- 12.7 Request for the top table to use microphones at future meetings.

Neil Stewart agreed to arrange this in the future at Westhill.

13. Date of Next Meeting

Councillor Hood advised that the next meeting of the Area Bus Forum will be held in Kemnay in autumn 2018.