

## **MARR AREA BUS FORUM**

**MINUTES OF MEETING ON WEDNESDAY 18<sup>TH</sup> APRIL 2018**

**STEWART'S HALL (NEW ROOM), HUNTLY**

### **In Attendance**

#### **Councillor M. Ingleby (Aberdeenshire Council) (Chair)**

Lucy Styles (Community Planning Officer (Marr), Aberdeenshire Council)

Alexina Grant (Bus User)

Iain Grant (Bus User)

Elizabeth Henry (Bus User)

Kathleen McPherson

Mabel Simpson

Steven Murray

Laura Bowie

Margaret Wylie

Ingrid Wylie

William Mainus (Commercial Manager, Stagecoach North Scotland)

Neil Stewart (Principal Officer, Aberdeenshire Council)

Susan Watt (Senior Transport Officer, Aberdeenshire Council)

Claire Marshall (Transport Officer, Aberdeenshire Council)

### **Apologies**

Carole Paterson (Braemar Bus User)

Pamela Gaull (Banchory Bus User)

### **1. Welcome and Introduction**

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

### **2. Minutes of the Meeting on 11<sup>th</sup> October 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 to speed up journeys on Service 218 (Aberdeen – Westhill – Alford) and for it to serve Union Street (Aberdeen), he confirmed that the service was rerouted within Westhill with effect from 8<sup>th</sup> January 2018 to operate via Straik Road to speed up journey times. However, in response to requests, from 7<sup>th</sup> May 2018, the service will operate via Wellgrove Road and Old Skene Road, for the benefit of passengers wishing to access the shops in Westhill.
- 3.2 In response to the claims that the publicity displayed at bus stops on the A93 at Silverbank (Banchory) and on the A980 at Torphins, is inaccurate, he confirmed that the information at both locations has now been rectified.

- 3.3 In regards to reported issues with Real-Time, he confirmed that the Council is still working with Stagecoach to try to improve functionality, which should be enhanced with Stagecoach introducing upgraded ticket machines.
- 3.4 In response to the concerns raised regarding buses not being able to safely serve the raised boarding kerbs in Lumphanan and Banchory, he confirmed that his understanding was that the problem lies with the door mechanisms on some of the vehicles, as all raised kerbs in the area were checked and found to be of the correct standard height.

William Mainus confirmed that on some vehicles, the door drops down before opening.

- 3.5 In response to the request for an update regarding the location of the bus shelter on Golf Road (Ballater) outside the Co-op, he confirmed that a site investigation was held, involving Councillors, and it was agreed that this was currently the safest place for the facility. However, traffic management options are being explored at this location and an update will be provided accordingly.
- 3.6 In response to the claim that timetable information displayed at bus stops on Union Street is incorrect for services travelling to/from Westhill, he confirmed that this has been rectified.
- 3.7 In response to the requests for a bus service to operate during the school holidays along South Deeside Road and another between Strathdon and Alford, he confirmed that at this time the Local Bus Services Budget is fully committed, and that the Council is unable to put on any new services unless something else is withdrawn. He confirmed that he would try to gauge the demand this year for services operating during the school holidays, but that the Strathdon A2B dial-a-bus service was withdrawn due to extremely limited usage including during the school holidays.
- 3.8 In response to the request for the Alford A2B dial-a-bus service to operate on a Thursday instead of a Tuesday, he confirmed that this could not be fulfilled as the vehicle is used in Banchory on a Thursday, and there are no other Council vehicles in the area. In response to the complaint that the bus is not easily accessible due to steps, he confirmed that there is a passenger lift which is suitable for people to use, whilst standing with assistance from the driver.
- 3.9 In response to the request to re-instate the circular link between Aboyne, Tarland and Lumphanan, by re-routing Service 210, he confirmed that regrettably this service will be withdrawn with effect from 7<sup>th</sup> May 2018 (see Item 5.2 below).

William Mainus provided the following update on behalf of Stagecoach Bluebird:

- 3.10 In response to the request to advance the 0615 hours ex Ballater – Torphins – Banchory – Aberdeen (Service 203) so that it can connect with the 0715 hours ex Strachan – Aberdeen (Service 204), he confirmed that the journey has been re-timed to depart Ballater at 0600 hours, allowing a connection in Banchory. However, he confirmed that he was aware that the Service 203 journey has operated late recently, so monitoring is currently being undertaken.

It was confirmed from the floor that the journey is now operating on time.

- 3.11 In regards to the persistent late running of the 1620 hours and 1715 hours ex Aberdeen – Lumphanan/Ballater (Service 202), he confirmed that on 8<sup>th</sup> January 2018 the departure times were altered in order to provide an additional 15 minutes to the journey time to improve reliability. He also confirmed that over a recent 3 week period, journeys ran late on only two of those days.

It was raised from the floor that the 1630 hours ex Aberdeen operated late today (18<sup>th</sup> April) due to issues on the railway track, and departed 30 minutes late on Monday 16<sup>th</sup> April 2018.

William Mainus confirmed that today there had been issues due to cattle on the railway line near Elgin, which led to people transferring to the buses and this had resulted in late operation. He confirmed that he would investigate the report of late running on Monday 16<sup>th</sup> April.

- 3.12 In regards to the reported capacity issues on the 1630 hours (was 1620 hours) ex Aberdeen – Lumphanan/Ballater (Service 202), he confirmed that the 3 week monitoring period showed that the vehicle operated on this journey had sufficient capacity on all but three days, including one occasion during the First Aberdeen strike in the City when demand increased. He explained that on these three occasions, whilst records show a higher number of passengers than the number of seats, it does not mean that all passengers were on board at the same time so the limit may not have been reached.
- 3.13 In regards to the complaints regarding the double deck buses allocated to the Deeside corridor, he confirmed that there are “57 and 58 plate” vehicles allocated to this corridor, with dual purpose seating, which will be repainted and “freshened up” in the near future.
- 3.14 In response to the remark of the intention to highlight particular journeys on the Services 201/202/203 timetable that can carry bicycles, he confirmed that coaches are designed to carry bikes and should operate on the corridor, however following the timetable changes implemented on 8<sup>th</sup> January 2018, there were still vehicle allocation issues, so once these have settled down, he will look at highlighting the appropriate journeys on the timetable.
- 3.15 In response to the claim that the 0615 hours ex Ballater – Aberdeen broke down on Monday 9<sup>th</sup> October 2017, he confirmed that this was correct.
- 3.16 In response to the claim that driver changeovers at Craigview Road (Ballater) are stopping traffic, he confirmed that a risk assessment has been undertaken, and as the location is on a straight section of road, it has been deemed a safe location to carry out this process.
- 3.17 In response to the request for the 0820 hours ex Braemar – Aberdeen (Service 201/202/203) on Saturdays to be advanced to depart at the same time as on weekdays, he confirmed that this was not possible as the knock on effect would be a longer gap between services in Braemar.
- 3.18 In response to the request for reduced fares for young people between ages 16 and 18 years of age, he confirmed that Stagecoach Bluebird are committed to looking at providing a discount fare, which is currently being investigated.

Councillor Ingleby queried where the outcome of this would be reported once a decision has been made.

William Mainus confirmed that it would be reported at the Area Bus Forums.

- 3.19 In response to the complaints regarding the diesel and noise pollution from the Stagecoach Bus Depot in Ballater, he confirmed that this has been resolved and drivers have been instructed accordingly. He asked that any further specific instances be reported to the company as and when they occur.

#### **4. Stagecoach Bluebird Update**

William Mainus provided the following update:

- 4.1 A number of changes were made to services on 8<sup>th</sup> January 2018, primarily to improve reliability of services, react to changes in demand, and address capacity issues. He explained that it is important to allow these changes to bed-in and monitor the outcome, with a view to implementing further changes in August 2018.

#### **5. Aberdeenshire Council Update**

Neil Stewart provided the following update:

- 5.1 Coinciding with commercial service changes on 8<sup>th</sup> January 2018, the 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.
- 5.2 For the second consecutive year, a review of Council supported Local Bus Services was required to ensure that spending does not exceed the Budget allocation for the forthcoming financial year, with a predicted shortfall in the 2018/19 Budget of approximately £200,000. This affected 4 services in the Marr Area, with changes to be implemented on 7<sup>th</sup> May 2018.
- Service 41A (Inverurie – Inch - Huntly): The 0732 hours ex Inverurie – Huntly via Inch, returning at 1600 hours, will be withdrawn on weekdays during school holidays. 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 near these times.
  - Service 210 (Tarland – Aboyne): This Monday and Wednesday inter-peak service will be withdrawn, with an average of 1 passenger per journey. Tarland continues to receive a peak hourly service to/from Aberdeen. During the inter peak there are alternative community transport services.
  - Service 105 (Banchory – Rickarton – Stonehaven): This Monday and Thursday inter-peak service will be withdrawn. There are no alternatives available without changing buses in Aberdeen. Surveys indicate 1 regular passenger from Rickarton, with the remainder (average 4 passengers per journey) being occasional users or tourists travelling in both directions between Banchory and Stonehaven.

- Service 204 (Banchory – Aberdeen via South Deeside): The Tuesday and Friday inter-peak return journey will be withdrawn, but the weekday peak return journey between Strachan and Aberdeen will be retained. Excluding those who travel between Banchory and Aberdeen, there is an average of 3 passengers per day, originating in Durriss, Blairs and Kirkton of Maryculter. Whilst there are no alternatives available to/from Aberdeen, there are Aberdeenshire A2B dial-a-bus services operating between Durriss/Kirkton of Maryculter and Portlethen, and between Durriss and Banchory.

## **6. Bus Service Requests/Development**

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

- 6.1 He confirmed that a new request had been received for later journeys from Aberdeen to Alford on Service 218 (Alford – Westhill - Aberdeen), however no further action will be taken as there are Service X20 departures from Aberdeen to Alford via Kemnay at 2015 hours and 2250 hours.
- 6.2 It was raised from the floor that during the last timetable change on 8<sup>th</sup> January 2018, the 1755 hours ex Lumphanan – Torphins – Aberdeen was withdrawn, leaving a 5.5 hour gap in services departing Torphins for Aberdeen. It was requested that this gap be filled by rerouting either the 1635 hours or 1735 hours ex Braemar to serve Torphins.

William Mainus confirmed that he would look at loading figures for these two journeys and see if diverting one of them would adversely affect regular passengers and, if possible, this change could be implemented in August 2018.

- 6.3 Susan Watt confirmed that a request had been received for Service 501 (Ballater – Pitlochry/Blairgowrie) to be re-instated for summer 2018.

William Mainus confirmed that there is no intention to resume Service 501 this year as it is not commercially viable.

## **7. Public Transport Infrastructure/Information**

Neil Stewart welcomed requests for bus stops, bus shelters and related infrastructure.

- 7.1 Request for the current cantilever shelter to be changed to an enclosed shelter at Bucksburn Police Station (Aberdeen) as there is no protection from the weather at this location.

Neil Stewart confirmed that he would pass on details to Aberdeen City Council.

## **8. Service 10/10A/10B (Aberdeen – Inverurie – Huntly – Elgin – Inverness)**

- 8.1 Query as to whether drivers on the service operate on a hail and ride basis, in particular on the A96 at Kellockbank and Ythanwells (near Morgan McVeighs), where passengers are normally picked up travelling to Aberdeen but some drivers refuse to allow passengers to alight at these locations. It was claimed that some drivers do not stop out with towns and villages at all.

This was coupled with a query as to what the procedure is if the driver does not drop passengers off at these locations, as this would result in them either having to travel to the next location deemed suitable by the driver, from where it could be unsafe to walk, or being taken to the nearest town or village, from where the passenger would need to book a taxi. It was queried whether Stagecoach would refund the cost of taxis in such instances.

William Mainus confirmed that the service operates on a 'hail and ride' basis in rural areas, where there are no fixed bus stops, but the drivers need to decide where it is safe to pick up and set down, taking into account the geometry and condition of the road, as well as the level of traffic at the time. However, he added that drivers should not be making unilateral decisions to simply not stop in the rural areas at all and he asked that dates and times be provided in the future so this can be investigated, along with a copy of the bus ticket, and taxi receipt if required.

- 8.2 Request for the re-instatement of the peak Service X10 return journey between Huntly and Aberdeen which bypassed Inverurie (currently 06:53 hours ex Huntly at 17:45 hours ex Aberdeen). It was pointed out that the decision to reroute these journeys via Inverurie has had a huge impact on workers travelling between Huntly and Aberdeen, due to the increased journey time in both directions. It was also highlighted that Inverurie passengers have a choice of Services 10, X37 and 37.

William Mainus acknowledged that operating via Inverurie in the peak can add on 20-25 minutes to the journey but confirmed that one of the reasons Service X37 was introduced, was to try to address overloading issues on Service 10. In addition, Service X37 was also in anticipation of increased demand when the rail service between Aberdeen and Dyce is suspended for a 14 week period commencing on 12<sup>th</sup> May 2018, with further rail line closures between Aberdeen and Inverurie in the future, due to improvement works on the Aberdeen to Inverness line.

He confirmed that the request will be considered in the next review of the corridor.

- 8.3 Query as to whether the Aberdeen to Inverurie bus corridor will have sufficient capacity during the above works, coupled with a concern that passengers who have purchased weekly or monthly tickets in advance, may not be able to travel on their regular buses during this period due to an increase in passenger usage.

William Mainus confirmed that the introduction of Service X37, combined with bus replacement services funded by ScotRail, will provide sufficient capacity, but the situation will have to be monitored.

- 8.4 Request for Stagecoach to re-evaluate the journey times on the above peak journeys as buses frequently have to wait for up to 15 minutes in Inverurie or Port Elphinstone to ensure that they do not run ahead of the scheduled timetable.

William Mainus confirmed that he would arrange for this to be analysed.

- 8.5 Query as to what impact the AWPR will be expected to have on journey times on the A96 corridor.

William Mainus expressed the view that the completion of the AWPR works, due towards the end of the year, will speed up journey times within Aberdeen, and could increase vehicle availability if the pressure on such resources is eased. He confirmed that this would likely be the best time to reconsider the request discussed above.

- 8.6 Request for the 2 hour gap in the am peak to be filled between 0653 hours and 0842 hours ex Huntly – Aberdeen to allow passengers to attend medical appointments at Aberdeen Royal Infirmary (ARI), as frequently the first journey is full with those travelling to work, resulting in insufficient seating capacity.

William Mainus confirmed that the capacity issue would be investigated but it is currently not commercially viable to provide an additional departure.

- 8.7 Claim regarding insufficient capacity provided on the 1545 hours and 1645 hours ex Aberdeen – Inverness due to passengers boarding and alighting within the City and also within Inverurie, resulting in longer distance passengers being unable to board at ARI and Bucksburn Police Station, and having to wait up to an hour for the next scheduled bus. This was coupled with a request for further limitations on the number of stops used by the service and a comment that a Service 37 bus can arrive empty just after the Service 10.

William Mainus confirmed that the capacity issue from ARI would be investigated. He also advised that there are Service 37 departures at 1530 hours and 1630 hours, and a Service X37 departure at 1615 hours to provide alternatives for those travelling from Aberdeen to Inverurie.

It was raised from the floor that passengers, in particular travelling to/from Inverurie, prefer to travel on the new coaches allocated to Service 10, due to their enhanced comfort.

## **9. Service 201/202/203 (Aberdeen – Banchory – Ballater – Braemar)**

- 9.1 Susan Watt raised a request on behalf of a passenger, for toilet facilities to be provided on the coaches.

William Mainus confirmed that this is not currently possible as there is no suitable place on the corridor for a toilet drop.

9.2 It was claimed from the floor that, during the First Bus drivers' strike in Aberdeen, smaller buses were allocated to the corridor, instead of coaches, these being uncomfortable and not appropriate for the length of journey. Susan Watt raised a passenger complaint in this regard relating to operation of the 1145 hours ex Aberdeen - Braemar on 17<sup>th</sup> April 2018.

William Mainus confirmed that additional vehicles were allocated to the route during the strike, but these acted as duplicates to provide further capacity in addition to the vehicles normally operating. He agreed to check that this was the case with regard to the specific complaint.

**10. Date of Next Meeting**

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