

BANFF & BUCHAN AREA BUS FORUM

MINUTES OF MEETING ON THURSDAY 19TH APRIL 2018

ROOM 5, MACDUFF TOWN HALL, MACDUFF

In Attendance

Councillor M. Roy (Aberdeenshire Council) (Chair)

Councillor R. Cassie (Aberdeenshire Council)

Linda Youngson (Cornhill & Ordiquhill Community Council)

Sarah Murray (Royal Voluntary Service)

Rebecca Ross (Banffshire Partnership)

Jim McHattie (Bus User)

Alex Huth (Bus User)

Norma Ritchie (Bus User)

Jean Stewart (Bus User)

Jean McGarrigle (Bus User)

Mandy Walker (Bus User)

Nicky Thom (Gardenstown Resident)

Alexander Munro (Bus User)

Iris Munro (Bus User)

W. Thain (Bus User)

Pamela Reid (Macduff Resident)

Ted Reid (Bus User)

Isobel Baxter (Bus User)

Jane Rothnie (Bus User)

Mrs M. Sorrell (Local Resident)

Mrs E. Smith (Bus User)

E. Stewart (Bus User)

B. Wiseman (Bus User)

A. McHattie (Bus User)

Sarah Pratt (Local Resident)

Natasha Pratt (Bus User)

K. Smith (Bus User)

Flora Grabowska (Crovie Resident)

Richard Menard (Macduff Resident)

Lynn Menard (Deveron Coaches)

Graeme Leslie (Operations 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)

1. Welcome and Introduction

Councillor Roy welcomed everyone to the meeting and introductions were given. He confirmed that a request had been received for two Bus Forums in the Banff and Buchan area – one in Macduff and one in Fraserburgh – so this was being trialled, with the Fraserburgh Forum being held a month previous.

2. Minutes of Meeting on 24th 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 Regarding the request for the relocation of a shelter on Main Street at Harbour Road (Gardenstown), he advised that there has been a misprint in the minutes and that the request actually related to a bus stop, so it will be considered once the works relating to the landslip have been completed. However, due to the inconsiderate parking of private vehicles, there are issues with the bus being unable to serve the bottom of Gardenstown. He acknowledged that Stagecoach are attempting to provide a service to the area.

Councillor Cassie confirmed that a 7 week programme of work was due to commence on 27th April 2018, with the road due to be reopened under a traffic management system.

- 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.
- 3.3 In response to the request for the provision of a bus shelter opposite Kirkton Cemetery, Fraserburgh, he confirmed that this will be considered within the 2018-2019 financial year budget.
- 3.4 In regards to the vandalised electronic Real-Time screen at Broad Street (Fraserburgh), he confirmed that this is still inactive, with plans to replace the shelter in the 2018-2019 financial year, and provide a 28” screen which will hopefully be more vandal-proof.

Graeme Leslie provided the following update on behalf of Stagecoach Bluebird:

- 3.5 In response to the request for Service 35 (Aberdeen – Banff – Elgin) to be re-routed via Deveron Community and Sports Centre in the evenings, he confirmed that details of opening/closing times have been sought and, following completion of the Aberdeen Western Peripheral Route (AWPR), the whole A947 corridor will be revised and the request will be taken into account.
- 3.6 In response to the request for the 0816 hours ex St Combs (Service 69: previously Service 75) to be retimed to allow a connection with the 0830 hours ex Fraserburgh – Aberdeen (Service 67), he confirmed that this was not possible due to an earlier contracted school journey but advised that there is a departure from Fraserburgh at 0857 hours.
- 3.7 In response to the request for the warning sign on *Buchan Xpress* vehicles to be in larger font and relocated to the top of the stairway, he confirmed that this had been fulfilled.
- 3.8 In response to the list of complaints compiled by Councillor Cox regarding Service 35, Graeme Leslie confirmed that he did not dispute any of the claims and acknowledged that the breakdowns occurred. He confirmed that every effort is being made to improve reliability on the corridor with a number of improvements to the age profile of the fleet over the last year which has seen 13 coaches replaced with newer vehicles in this time. In response to concerns raised at the previous meeting regarding air conditioning, a campaign has been undertaken on the Moray fleet to address this, over and above routine maintenance.

4. Stagecoach Bluebird Update

Graeme Leslie provided the following update:

- 4.1 Service 35A (Aberdeen – Oldmeldrum/Banff) was withdrawn, due to very low patronage, on 8th January 2018.
- 4.2 Stagecoach Bluebird have just rolled out a contactless payment system for passengers. This means that drivers can carry less cash and it speeds up passenger boarding. Stagecoach Bluebird is the first in the Stagecoach Group in Scotland to roll this out, but other Stagecoach companies in the UK have benefitted from this upgrade.
- 4.3 Once the AWPR is completed, the network will need to be looked at in terms of running times and to investigate what opportunities are presented.
- 4.4 Since the Forum was last held in Macduff, 12 newer vehicles have been allocated to Service 35, 9 of which had been fully refurbished.

5. Aberdeenshire Council Update

Neil Stewart provided the following update:

- 5.1 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 just one service in the Banff & Buchan area. Service 252 (New Deer – Mintlaw – Fraserburgh), comprising one return journey, will be withdrawn with effect from 7th May 2018, resulting in net savings of approximately £40,000 per year.

6. Bus Service Requests / Development

Neil Stewart referred to the papers circulated, detailing pending and fulfilled service requests in the Banff and Buchan area, all have which have already been discussed, and welcomed any further service requests.

7. Public Transport Infrastructure / Information

Neil Stewart welcomed any infrastructure or information requests/comments from the floor.

- 7.1 Request for the provision of a bus shelter at the northbound Barnhill Road (Macduff) bus stop as there is no protection from the changing weather elements, in particular the rain and wind.
- 7.2 Request for the provision of a bus stop on John Street in Aberdeen.

Neil Stewart confirmed that he would pass on contact details for Aberdeen City Council at the end of the meeting.

8. Service 35 (Aberdeen – Turriff – Macduff – Banff – Elgin)

8.1 Claim that the 1435 hours ex Aberdeen – Banff (Low Street) on Fridays has operated on time at North Anderson Drive (Aberdeen) on 17 occasions out of 26, highlighting that on one occasion it didn't operate at all, resulting in the passenger waiting 90 minutes for the next available bus, which was the 1535 hours ex Aberdeen running 20 minutes late. However, it was raised that there has been a noticeable improvement in reliability recently, with the worst performance being around October – November 2017.

8.2 Complaint regarding the display screens at the front of the vehicles showing Oldmeldrum and in smaller letters underneath "for Elgin", resulting in confusion for passengers.

Graeme Leslie confirmed that this was due to the service being split into four separate registrations to comply with EU drivers' hours' regulations, but the ultimate destination will always be displayed. He advised that there is still an issue regarding Real-Time screens, which would say "Oldmeldrum" rather than "Elgin", but that a resolution for this is being sought.

8.3 Claim regarding frequent late running and breakdowns on the corridor, coupled with seatbelts being dirty, and at times not working, with one bus in particular having a loose seat for a long period of time, despite being reported to the driver and the door not operating correctly with passengers having to help the driver close the door of the bus.

Graeme Leslie confirmed that an additional 15 minutes was added onto each journey to address reliability. He advised that a new cleaner has been employed at the Macduff depot, which should improve the interior cleanliness of the vehicles and advised that the seatbelts should be checked by the driver every morning to ensure they are working. He asked that the specific details be provided.

8.4 Complaint regarding the quality of the vehicles, with particular reference to the heating systems not working, highlighting that the vehicles are very cold in the winter but can be too hot in the summer. It was also claimed that the toilet facilities are rarely in operation.

Graeme Leslie confirmed that additional checks, on top of routine maintenance inspections, had been put in place, and a significant amount of money spent on the cooling systems. He also advised that a toilet drop is available in Macduff and the toilets should be accessible, unless they are locked due damage.

8.5 Complaint regarding an occasion in which a driver had not accepted a £50 note from a passenger in payment for a bus ticket which cost £47.50. Instead the driver asked the passenger to go to an ATM to obtain cash in smaller denominations, whilst the driver waited.

Graeme Leslie advised that it is company policy throughout the Stagecoach Group that drivers do not accept £50 notes on buses, highlighting that drivers are accountable for cash received from passengers.

Councillor Roy confirmed that several businesses do not accept £50 notes.

In response to the request for the Stagecoach policy to be reconsidered, Graeme Leslie confirmed that he would investigate whether there had been any discussions within Stagecoach Group regarding this.

- 8.6 Claim regarding frequent breakdowns and late running on the 0751 hours ex Macduff - Elgin, including two Mondays in a row, affecting, amongst others, a young passenger who had previously purchased weekly tickets but was late for work so often that they been forced to resort to only buying tickets on a daily basis. This of course has worked out more expensive and difficult to afford.

Graeme Leslie confirmed that he is aware of issues on the corridor and newer vehicles had been allocated to the corridor, with reliability improving lately and he asked the passenger concerned to speak to him after the meeting.

- 8.7 Claim that low floor "city" type buses are often allocated on the route, the rumour being that there are insufficient coaches available.

Graeme Leslie confirmed that only coaches should be allocated to the corridor and that he would investigate this.

- 8.8 Claim that there is insufficient seating capacity during the afternoon peak journeys leaving Aberdeen due to passengers boarding and alighting within the City, resulting in passengers travelling out with the city boundary being unable to board, in particular at Aberdeen Royal Infirmary (ARI).

Graeme Leslie confirmed that the service has been monitored between 1500 hours and 1800 hours at ARI and the company has introduced additional vehicles to alleviate capacity issues. However, in view of the comments he agreed to resume this monitoring. He also confirmed that during the recent strike action by First Aberdeen bus drivers, additional buses were brought into service to respond to demand.

- 8.9 Request for consideration to be given to extending the journeys which currently terminate at Low Street Interchange in Banff to operate through the town so that people don't have to walk up the hill.

Councillor Roy confirmed that these buses could extend to serve Deveron Community Sports Centre and then return to Low Street.

Graeme Leslie confirmed that there are possible constraints with the vehicle workings, however he is happy to look at this and see if it is possible.

- 8.10 The drivers on the corridor received compliments from the floor for remaining calm in the face of threats and verbal abuse from the public when there are instances of breakdowns and late running.

- 8.11 It was raised from the floor that there has been an improvement in reliability over the last 15-16 weeks, with a possible reason being cited as the improvements relating to the AWPR at Dyce.

- 8.12 Request for *new* buses to be allocated to the corridor, rather than *newer* buses, which were introduced last year.

Graeme Leslie confirmed the vehicles currently allocated are 6 years old, with a life span of 12 years, representing a considerable improvement, but it is not currently viable to replace these with new vehicles.

9. Service 272 (Banff – Fraserburgh)

- 9.1 Request for the 1302 hours ex Banff – Fraserburgh to have a longer layover in Fraserburgh before operating the return journey at 1405 hours ex Fraserburgh – Banff, to allow time for shopping in Fraserburgh.

Graeme Leslie confirmed that, whilst this would be considered in consultation with the Council, he anticipated that the timings may be tied in with a school contract commencing from Banff Academy at around 1515 hours, therefore there is little scope to add more time in Fraserburgh.

(For information, there is a 1555 hours departure from Fraserburgh bus station to Banff via New Pitsligo on Service 271A).

10. Service 273 (Banff – Gardenstown/Fraserburgh)

- 10.1 Request for Stagecoach Bluebird to purchase a smaller vehicle to ensure that the service can operate to the bottom of Gardenstown, highlighting that there are vulnerable people living at the bottom of a steep hill who have no other means of transport. It was raised that a new 17 seat minibus can be purchased at a cost of £30,000.

Graeme Leslie confirmed that the vehicle operating on the corridor was damaged due to the ongoing situation of inconsiderately parked vehicles near the church and at the bus stop at the bottom of Gardenstown, preventing the bus from passing or turning safely. He confirmed that he shares the frustrations of the people affected but the only credible solution when this happens is for the bus to serve the top of hill, near the SPAR shop.

He also confirmed that a smaller bus is not a viable option from a business point of view.

Councillor Cassie reaffirmed that the issue of parked vehicles should be removed once the road reopens, as it will allow vehicles to access the New Ground area again.

Neil Stewart confirmed that the service is mainly subsidised by the Council, as it is not commercially viable.

Councillor Roy confirmed that a great deal of effort has been put in by all parties on the Gardenstown issue, but the land slip has created a huge problem which will take time to resolve.

- 10.2 Claim that Stagecoach have “doubled up” the operation of the Mainstream School Contract between Gardenstown and Banff and the local bus service 273 in the mornings, to operate both journeys with one vehicle, resulting in school pupils travelling on a fare paying service.

Neil Stewart confirmed that he was not aware of this ever happening and that he would consult his colleagues responsible for Mainstream School Transport.

Graeme Leslie confirmed that he would also investigate this.

- 10.3 Request for journey times to be looked at on a Saturday, as 5 hours in Fraserburgh is too long.

Neil Stewart confirmed that this is a one bus operation and to reduce the amount of time available in Fraserburgh would have a knock-on effect on the remainder of the timetable.

- 10.4 Councillor Cassie requested that the service be re-routed via High Shore (Macduff), highlighting that there is an elderly and disabled community in the area that would benefit from the provision of a bus service.

Neil Stewart advised that 2 site investigations have been undertaken in this area, using an Optare Solo, one of the smallest buses on Stagecoach Bluebird's fleet and the vehicle required to operate on the contract. It was concluded by all attending that the vehicle could not navigate the streets safely.

11. Service 301 (Macduff – Aberchirder – Huntly)

- 11.1 Claim regarding the 1600 hours ex Huntly – Cornhill operating 30 minutes late on both 3rd and 4th April 2018, coupled with the driver operating incorrectly through Cornhill and undertaking a turning manoeuvre on the main road, instead of at the car park.

Neil Stewart confirmed that the car park is the Council approved turning point in the interest of road safety and requested that any future issues be reported to the Council at the time of the incident.

12. Service 300 (Banff & Macduff Town Service)

- 12.1 The company and its drivers were complimented on providing an excellent service.

13. Service 405 (Macduff – Fordyce – Sandend – Cullen)

- 13.1 Claim that the turning circle at Boyndie Visitor Centre is frequently not served, resulting in passengers having to board and alight a distance away from the centre and walking along the road, causing stress and confusion as to where to stand.

Councillor Cassie confirmed that this was due to the operator allocating a vehicle which is too large to serve the turning circle.

Neil Stewart confirmed that this is a contracted service and that it should not be operated by a vehicle with a capacity of more than 27 seats. He stressed that this is a serious matter.

Graeme Leslie confirmed that this would be investigated as a matter of urgency.

14. A.O.B.

- 14.1 Request to continue scheduling 2 bus forums in the Banff and Buchan Area on a six monthly basis, with one being held in Fraserburgh and one being held in Macduff or Banff.

Neil Stewart confirmed that, in view of the sizeable turnouts at both Fraserburgh and Macduff, this arrangement will be continued until further notice.

- 14.2 Complaint regarding buses not being able to serve the bus stop on Main Street (Aberchirder) due to parked vehicles.

Councillor Roy confirmed that officers in the Council's Roads and Landscape Services are aware of this issue and are investigating potential parking proposals.

- 14.3 It was raised from the floor that the excuse of having no spare vehicles to cover breakdowns has been used at Forum meetings, however during the strike by First Aberdeen drivers, a lot of additional Stagecoach buses appear to be operating in Aberdeen.

Graeme Leslie acknowledged this is as a fair comment and confirmed that additional buses had been brought in to the City from out with north-east Scotland to provide duplicate resources to accommodate additional demand for Stagecoach services, but only for the duration of the strike, so people were not left stranded.

15. **Next Meeting**

Councillor Roy confirmed that the next meeting of the Forum will take place in Macduff in autumn 2018.