

GARIOCH AREA BUS FORUM

MINUTES OF MEETING ON THURSDAY 6 SEPTEMBER 2018

FRIENDSHIP ROOM, KEMNAY VILLAGE HALL

In Attendance

Councillor F. Hood (Aberdeenshire Council) (Chair)

Pam Young (Newmachar Community Council)

Fiona Duncan (Newmachar Community Council)

Sheila Gray (Kintore Community Council)

Ann Marston (Kintore Community Council)

Raymond Swaffield (Westhill and Elrick Community Council)

Aileen Swaffield (Bus User)

Margaret Basley (Bus User)

Sue Wainman (Kemnay Events)

Neil Peace (Bus User)

Sandra Coutts (Bus User)

Jock McGregor (Bus User)

Margaret McGregor (Bus User)

G Duguid (Bus User)

Doug Bain (Bain's Coaches)

Daniel Laird (Commercial Director, Stagecoach North Scotland)

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

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

Apologies

Councillor M. Ford (Aberdeenshire Council)

Councillor I. Walker (Aberdeenshire Council)

Margaret-Jane Cardno (Garioch Area Manager)

James Cowe

Dorothy Cowe

1. Welcome and Introduction

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

2. Minutes of Meeting on 22nd March 2018

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 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 his understanding that drawings have been undertaken of the proposed location and a response is awaited from Transport Scotland.
- 3.2 In response to Councillor Walker's request for lighting and a base of hardstanding at the bus stop at Strawberry Field Road (on Broadstraik Brae, Westhill), he confirmed that the base has been installed and the request for lighting is currently being considered by colleagues in Roads and Landscapes services. He explained that the requisite number of lighting columns are already in place on this stretch of road, so additional lighting may not be provided.

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

- 3.3 In response to the claims regarding frequent late running of the 1715 hours ex Aberdeen – Kemnay (Service 420), he confirmed that service monitoring over recent weeks found the journey to have operated only up to 2 minutes late, with the exception of 4 September 2018, when it did depart 7 minutes late from Union Square Bus Station.

It was agreed from the floor that journey punctuality had improved since the last meeting.

- 3.4 In response to the request for the half hourly service from Kintore to Inverurie to be re-instated, he confirmed that passenger numbers do not justify this, so there are no plans to make any changes.
- 3.5 In response to the request for additional journeys between Kintore and Aberdeen to bridge the gap between 1530 hours and 1634 hours ex Kintore (Monday to Friday), he confirmed that passenger figures on the 1533 hours ex Inverurie (Service X37) were being monitored, to see whether this journey could be re-routed via Kintore and he would provide an update at the next meeting.
- 3.6 In response to the request for Service 37 journeys to serve the north end of Kintore (at Lochburn Drive), he confirmed that drivers have been instructed accordingly.

In response to a query as to why drivers need to changeover in Kintore, he confirmed that there is sometimes no option in order to adhere to drivers' hours' regulations.

- 3.7 In response to the matter raised by Councillor Hood regarding buses stopping on a slip road, on a bend at Kintore, for driver changeovers, he confirmed that this practice is currently being reviewed.

It was suggested from the floor that this practice take place at the next stop down, just before the garage.

- 3.8 In response to the reported incident on 1st March 2018, when a passenger was informed by the driver that the bus could not serve Kintore due to the snow, he apologised for having no record of the incident.

Sheila Gray confirmed that she would look out the details and resend them to Daniel.

- 3.9 In response to the claim that the new timetable for Services 37/X37 is too confusing for some passengers, he confirmed that it is planned to have a combined timetable showing all journeys on Services 10, 37 and X37, and reaction to this will be gauged at forthcoming consultation events.

It was raised from the floor that some journeys operate very close together, to which Daniel responded that every effort is made to avoid this occurring.

- 3.10 In response to the claim regarding late running on 20th March 2018 of the 1018 hours ex Banff - Aberdeen (35 minutes late in Newmachar), he confirmed that an investigation showed the vehicle leaving Banff 10 minutes late, but had arrived at Union Square on schedule.

It was raised from the floor that it was the previous journey which had not turned up.

Councillor Hood asked if Stagecoach Bluebird could provide figures on the number of vehicle breakdowns on the A947 corridor, to which Daniel agreed to source for the next meeting.

- 3.11 In response to the claim that, due to insufficient seats on Service 35 being available at Newmachar, passengers often have to wait for up to an hour, he confirmed that the introduction of newer coaches in autumn 2017, along with the formation of a new management team covering the Macduff and Elgin area, has resulted in the service improving since the last meeting.

It was acknowledged from the floor that the service has improved, but the capacity issue does still occur, albeit less frequently.

Councillor Hood confirmed that he had received complaints from Newmachar passengers, that the only way they can be near confident of getting a seat in the morning peak (particularly 0821 hrs ex Newmachar – Aberdeen) is to board at the Wildgoose Drive bus stop (north end of the town). He also queried whether drivers report such matters to management.

Daniel Laird confirmed that additional vehicles were allocated to the corridor during the closure of the railway line between Inverurie and Dyce, to ensure there were sufficient seats to cover additional demand, but he was not aware of insufficient seats being available from Newmachar. He confirmed that this issue would be included in the forthcoming public consultation.

He also confirmed that drivers report back on capacity and other issues.

- 3.12 In response to the repeated request for a departure leaving Aberdeen at around 2230 hours for those attending His Majesty's Theatre (HMT), he confirmed that the new timetable incorporates retiming of the 2135 hours departure to depart from Union Square Bus Station at 2205 hours, arriving at HMT at around 2210 hours.

Following discussion and comments received from the floor, Councillor Hood asked if the bus could leave at 2215 hours instead, allowing people more time to arrive at the bus stop. Daniel confirmed that this would be considered, but may depend on scheduling/driver duty considerations.

5. Stagecoach Bluebird Update

Daniel Laird provided the following update:

4.1 Following a review, proposals for the services below were the subject of public consultation until 21 September 2018. He confirmed that it was mainly to take account of punctuality and reliability issues on the corridors and the implementation date was 12 November 2018.

- Service X17 (Aberdeen - Westhill)
- Service 37/X37 (Aberdeen - Inverurie)
- Service 10 (Aberdeen - Inverness)
- Service 35 (Aberdeen - Elgin)

Councillor Hood asked if details of the consultation could be publicised via Community Council websites affected and Aberdeenshire Council social media.

Neil Stewart confirmed that he would arrange the latter.

Daniel Laird confirmed that the company was staging a number of events, as listed on their website, and also there had been details of a Press Release in the Press & Journal and Evening Express.

In response to a query from the floor as to how altering times improves reliability, Daniel explained that there has been a need to redistribute times as there are stretches of route where buses lose time and others where running times are too generous.

4.2 There has been a relaunch of student products including a new ticket for Zone 3 now being available between September 2018 and June 2019, providing a cheaper option.

https://maps-stagecoachbus.s3.amazonaws.com/NSCOT_Bluebird.pdf

5. Autumn 2017 Bus Passenger Satisfaction Survey

Neil Stewart referred to the handout (also provided separately) and gave the following update:

5.1 Transport Focus undertakes an annual Bus Passenger Survey (BPS) and, whilst the 2016 survey was funded by Transport Scotland, the Regional Transport Partnerships (RTPs) and operators, the 2017 survey was funded by the main national operators based upon their operational areas and not, as previously was the case, geographically based on the RTP regions.

For north east Scotland, this was therefore primarily a survey of Stagecoach Bluebird and First Aberdeen routes, but the former's City services were not included on this occasion.

Supplementary funding from Nestrans enabled Transport Focus to extract the relevant results for Aberdeenshire and enhance the Aberdeenshire responses, with additional samples taken from further Stagecoach routes and a supported service route operated by MW Nicoll. The resultant survey was undertaken between 11 September and 17 December 2017, and comprised 649 users in Aberdeenshire.

The principal finding of the autumn 2017 BPS was that Aberdeenshire bus users showed an increased level of satisfaction with the overall service, and also in 25 of the 33 specific aspects of bus service delivery, compared with the spring 2016 BPS.

Overall positive satisfaction with Bus Service Delivery increased by 2%, with the most significant increases (i.e. > +5%) being recorded in the categories of Punctuality (+7%), Length of Time Waiting for a Bus (+7%), Personal Safety at Bus Stop (+9%), Ease of Getting On and Off Bus (+7%), Time Taken to Board the Bus (+8%) and Nearness to Kerb (+8%).

Comparisons with the Nestrans area

The Aberdeenshire results compare favourably with the Nestrans area as a whole in most of the specific categories, the most significant differences in responses relating to driver behaviour, with positive satisfaction in Aberdeenshire outscoring that for the Nestrans area as a whole in the categories of Greeting/Welcome from Driver (+9%), Helpfulness of Driver (+7%) and Time Given to Get to Your Seat (+7%).

Positive satisfaction levels in Aberdeenshire also exceeded those in the Nestrans area as a whole by more than 5% in the categories of Information at Bus Stop (+6%), Personal Safety at Bus Stop (+6%), Smoothness of Journey (+6%) and Interior Cleanliness/Condition of Bus (+6%).

Comparisons with the English rural authorities

Benchmarking of local satisfaction levels was undertaken for each service delivery category against seven comparable English rural authorities covered by the same 2017 Transport Focus BPS, namely Cornwall, County Durham, Norfolk, Northamptonshire, Northumberland, Oxfordshire and Worcestershire.

Positive satisfaction levels for Aberdeenshire exceeded those for the benchmark English rural county authorities in the Transport Focus 2017 BPS in 25 of the 32 categories where like for like comparisons could be made.

Positive satisfaction levels in Aberdeenshire were more than 5% greater than the average across the seven English rural authorities in the categories of Personal Safety at Bus Stop (+8%), Freedom of Graffiti/Vandalism at Bus Stop (+6%), Freedom of Litter at Bus Stop (+6%), Overall Satisfaction with Bus Stop (+6%), Interior Cleanliness/Condition of Bus (+6%) and Comfort of the Seats (+6%).

The English rural authorities, on average, scored significantly higher than Aberdeenshire in only 3 categories, these being Value for Money (+7%), Ease of Getting On and Off Bus (+7%) and Provision of Grab Rails on Bus (+10%), the latter two results suggesting that buses are more accessible in other comparable areas of the UK.

6. Bus Service Requests / Development

6.1 The withdrawal of Council supported Service 220 (Elrick/Westhill – Aberdeen Royal Infirmary/Union Square) left the Hilltop/Hillside area of Westhill with no service, therefore it was requested that the following options be considered:

- Diverting Service X17, once per hour via Hilltop Turning Circle, Hillside Road, Westhill Road and Kinmundy Drive and vice versa; or
- A similar service, but cutting out Kinmundy Drive, to and from Kingswells Park and Ride; or
- Re-introduction of a “Town Service” along a similar route but which takes in Tesco, Costco and the Health Centre and connects with the main route at Westhill Interchange.

Daniel Laird ruled out any diversion of Service X17 at this time, whilst Neil Stewart reaffirmed that Service 220 had been withdrawn due to extremely limited usage, but Westhill A2B continues to provide a flexible town service facility.

<https://www.aberdeenshire.gov.uk/roads-and-travel/public-transport/a2b-dial-a-bus/westhill/>

Both Daniel and Neil confirmed that, in view of planned developments in the north east part of Westhill, there may be good reason to review service provision to/from that area in the future.

7. Public Transport Infrastructure / Information

7.1 Query regarding the lack of bus services operating via Craibstone Park and Ride?

Daniel Laird confirmed that Stagecoach Service 727 (Union Square - Airport) initially operated via Craibstone Park & Ride on a frequent basis, but usage was so limited that the service was eventually withdrawn from the site. He advised that Service 37 (Inverurie - Kintore - Blackburn - Aberdeen) still operates via the facility on a half-hourly frequency. He also confirmed that a study of the Park and Ride facilities in the north east, including why usage varies so much, has recently been undertaken and there will be proposals for the interested parties to discuss in the near future.

7.2 Claim regarding the Real-time passenger information at Westhill Interchange not operating correctly, with the live bus times sometimes disappearing from the screens and being replaced by scheduled times

Neil Stewart confirmed that this matter in general was being investigated in conjunction with the suppliers.

7.3 Similar claim to above, the location being His Majesty’s Theatre (Aberdeen)

Daniel Laird confirmed that the introduction of the new ticket machines on Stagecoach vehicles meant that 98% of buses are tracking correctly, but such issues can occur due to breakdowns or emergency re-routing of services.

7.4 Claim that the timetable information provided in the publicity case on Kemnay (High Street) is incorrect, with regard to the 0830 hours ex Kemnay (Service X20).

Neil Stewart confirmed that this would be investigated.

- 7.5 Request for the bus stops named in timetable publicity to correspond with the actual names of the bus stops themselves, so as to reduce to confusion for passengers.

Daniel Laird confirmed that this would be investigated.

- 7.6 Query as to whom is responsible for the provision of litter bins at bus stops

Neil Stewart confirmed that it is the Council's Environmental Services.

- 7.7 Complaints that the timetable information is placed too high at a number of bus stops in Kintore (no specific locations) and Blackburn (at Benview).

Neil Stewart confirmed that this would be investigated.

8. Service 10 (Aberdeen - Inverness)

- 8.1 Repeated request to re-route journeys via Blackburn and Kintore.

Daniel Laird confirmed that adding more stops would put too much pressure on the current service, which can experience both reliability and capacity issues.

- 8.2 In response to above, there was a query as to why the service stops at Aberdeen Royal Infirmary (ARI) and Bucksburn, as well as numerous stops in the Moray and Highland areas.

Daniel Laird advised that there is significant passenger demand to/from ARI and Bucksburn, particularly for work purposes. He added that, unlike Kintore and Blackburn, some towns and villages in Moray and Highland have no alternative local bus services available, partly due to a lack of local authority funding, so the company is trying to provide a service to as many of these areas as possible.

9. Service X17 (Aberdeen - Westhill)

- 9.1 See Item 6.1 above

10. Service X20/420 (Aberdeen – Kemnay/Alford)

- 10.1 Claim regarding a faulty heating system on the 1106 hours ex Kemnay – Aberdeen on 28 August 2018, when it was very hot and the driver was unable to turn it off.

Daniel Laird apologised for this and confirmed that, whilst drivers can control the level of heating on coaches, sometimes the buses only have an on/off mechanism linked to the engine. He added that all vehicles undertake a winter and summer maintenance service check, which includes testing of the heating system.

- 10.2 Claim regarding a lack of consistency of vehicles on the corridor, including 'urban-type' buses which are uncomfortable for travelling on such routes. It was requested that dedicated higher quality comfortable vehicles with controllable heating be allocated to the services.

Daniel Laird advised that vehicles allocated to the services have to interwork with school contracts but confirmed that the company is trying to improve quality. He pointed out, for

example, that in response to comments received at this Forum, the hydrogen buses were removed from the corridor, as they are more suited to urban operation.

He also advised that Stagecoach North Scotland's new Managing Director is from an engineering background and he is looking at the quality of the fleet.

- 10.3 Claim that there were 16 standees on the 0720 hours ex Kemnay – Aberdeen on Wednesday 5 September 2018.

Daniel Laird confirmed that this would be investigated.

11. Service 35 (Aberdeen - Elgin) (see also 3.11 and 3.12 above)

- 11.1 Requested for the service or at least 50% of the service, to be re-routed to serve Union Terrace and John Street instead of via the Denburn.

Daniel Laird explained that operating via the Denburn is considerably quicker, therefore it assists reliability within existing resources. He confirmed that this would be reconsidered post AWPR completion.

12. Service 37/X37 (Aberdeen - Inverurie) (see also 3.4, 3.5 and 3.6)

- 12.1 Query as to why Service X37 (Aberdeen – Inverurie) was introduced.

Daniel Laird explained that Service X37 (Aberdeen – Inverurie) was introduced in order to address capacity, by providing a fast service for Inverurie passengers, who previously used Service 10.

- 12.2 Request for only low floor vehicles to be operating on the corridor.

Daniel Laird confirmed that low floor vehicles are normally allocated to the corridor, however unforeseen circumstances such as breakdowns can result in other vehicle types being used as substitutes to ensure continuation of the service.

- 12.3 Complaint that connections between Service 37 (from Blackburn) and Service 10 are poor, resulting in a long wait in Inverurie, for northbound travel (Service 37 arrives at 31 minutes past the hour and service 10 departs at 21 minutes past the hour).

Daniel Laird confirmed that, whilst this will be looked at, he couldn't promise that either service could be retimed, as there are other considerations to be taken into account.

13. A.O.B.

- 13.1 Query as to whether bus drivers undertake training in customer service.

Daniel Laird confirmed that all drivers are required to initially complete a course in customer care, then have to complete refresher courses every 5 years.

14. Date of Next Meeting

Councillor Hood advised that the next meeting of the Area Bus Forum will be held in Inverurie in spring 2019.

Susan Watt confirmed that this was due to a review being undertaken of bus service provision in Inverurie, to establish whether existing resources for both commercial and supported facilities, could be better allocated to improve overall coverage.

Neil Stewart confirmed that the meeting will be extended to 2130 hours to allow a 30 minute slot on the above subject and allow the other areas to receive their usual coverage.