

FORMARTINE AREA BUS FORUM

MINUTES OF MEETING ON THURSDAY 29th SEPTEMBER 2022

STAFF ROOM, MELDRUM ACADEMY, OLDMELDRUM

In Attendance

Councillor I. Taylor (Aberdeenshire Council) (Chair)

Councillor A. Hassan (Aberdeenshire Council)

Councillor J. Goodhall (Aberdeenshire Council)

Councillor J. Nicol (Aberdeenshire Council)

Neil Stewart (Principal Officer, Aberdeenshire Council)

Marion MacKay ((Principal Officer, Aberdeenshire Council)

Susan Watt (Senior Transport Officer, Aberdeenshire Council)

Sandy Gallacher (Operations Manager, Stagecoach Bluebird)

Marcin Kaminski (Commercial Analyst, Stagecoach Bluebird)

Jenny McEwens (Oldmeldrum, Bourtie and Daviot Community Council)

Kathryn Vincent (Fyvie, Rothienorman and Monquhitter Community Council)

Colin Anderson (Community Planning Officer, Aberdeenshire Council)

Cala Goodhall (Bus User)

Hilda Drummond (Bus User)

Ray Kenyon (Bus User)

Anne Kenyon (Bus User)

Donna Morrison (Bus User)

Lorna Owen (Bus User)

Kevin Glennie (Bus User)

Apologies

Councillor A. Stirling (Aberdeenshire Council)

Councillor J. Crawley (Aberdeenshire Council)

Councillor A. Forsyth (Aberdeenshire Council)

Councillor I. Davidson (Aberdeenshire Council)

Councillor G. Owen (Aberdeenshire Council)

Lynn Cleaver (Fyvie, Rothienorman and Monquhitter Community Council)

Denise Belshaw (Methlick Community Council)

Bob Davidson (Tarves Community Council)

Dr L Parley

James Bruce (Bus User)

Lorraine Bruce (Bus User)

Ken Gow (Bus User)

George Philip (Bus User)

1. Welcome and Introduction

Councillor Taylor welcomed everyone to the meeting and introductions were given

2. Minutes of Meeting on 4th December 2019

The minutes were approved

3. Matters arising from the Minutes

Neil Stewart provided the following update:

- In response to the request for a Real-Time Passenger Information facility at Foveran, he confirmed that funding has become available for e-paper bus stop flags, allowing such information to be displayed at bus stops, but the locations have still to be confirmed.
- Regarding Ellon Park & Ride Phase 2, this has been completed and has been well received.
- Regarding the proposed bus hub at Oldmeldrum, the project is being progressed with site options being evaluated.
- Regarding an update on Blackdog (Service 64), the 2 day a week, interpeak peak service currently operates on Mondays and Thursdays to/from Aberdeen City Centre and is operated by Central Coaches. He confirmed that patronage continues to be low.

In response to a query as to what other services operate near the village of Blackdog, Marcin Kaminski advised that Services 50 and 53 (Aberdeen – Ellon) serve the bus stops on the slip roads at the roundabout.

- Neil Stewart added that the provision of a footpath from the village to the southbound bus stop on the roundabout is being progressed, with still some technical issues to resolve, and an update will be provided in due course.
- Bus shelters have been provided on the B999, outside Pitmedden School (northbound) and on the B9000 at and opposite Bronie Crescent (Pitmedden).
- Regarding the request for the provision of bus stops on the 'old' A90 at Rashierieve (southbound) and Fountainbleau (northbound and southbound), he confirmed that, near the Fountainbleau area, a footpath has been provided from the Tarty Road to the bus stops at Bridgend and Tipperty. The southbound boarding location at Rashierieve will continue to be hail and ride for now but will be reviewed.
- In response to the claim that the publicity displayed at the bus shelter on Market Street (Ellon) at Riverside car park (southbound) shows bus times for travel both northbound and southbound and this creates confusion for passengers, he confirmed that this referred to the information panel to the east of the bus shelter. He added that it is intended to provide details of both southbound and northbound departures and is clear as to which departures are from the bus stop opposite.

It was raised from the floor that the above display screen is frequently dislodged and vandalised.

- Regarding the request for the damaged lighting in the bus shelter located at Potterton on B999 (southbound) to be repaired, he confirmed that this has been undertaken.
- In response to the complaint regarding both northbound and southbound buses meeting at the same time, on some occasions, at Oldmeldrum Interchange, resulting in other vehicles being unable to pass, Marcin Kaminski proposed two alternative options for consideration:
 - i) Northbound buses to drop connecting passengers off on South Road, then wait for the road to clear before continuing. He highlighted that there is no crossing facility on South Road.

- ii) Northbound and Southbound buses all use Urquhart Road, utilising the southbound Interchange bus stop only. He highlighted that there may be capacity problems.

It was raised from the floor that, under option i) drivers would have to switch off their engines whilst waiting.

Neil Stewart advised Marcin Kaminski to contact Jim Bowe (Principal Officer, Information & Infrastructure) to discuss the proposals.

- In response to Councillor Johnston's comments regarding the lengthy journey times on Services 50/53 (Aberdeen - Ellon), due to the routing of journeys via Denmore Industrial Estate), Marcin Kaminski confirmed that these services have been rerouted via Ellon Road (A92).

(For information, bus services have recently been diverted via Denmore Road due to road works on Ellon Road (A92), to cover for a bus stop not currently in use).

- In response to the repeated request for additional peak time journeys between Aberdeen and Peterhead/Fraserburgh, during the a.m. and p.m. period, to be re-routed via Ellon town centre, Marcin Kaminski confirmed that this would be considered in the Buchan corridor review early in 2023.

Neil Stewart pointed out that it has been difficult for the operator to balance the needs of longer distance passengers with those of Ellon passengers, the former asking for faster journeys given the distances involved.

4. Aberdeenshire Council Update

Neil Stewart provided the following update:

- Early in the Covid 19 pandemic, a small number of services in the Formartine Area were suspended, then a review of supported services to contain spending within the allocated Budget for 2021/22 led to further withdrawals. However, later in 2021, a revised Budget meant the Council was able to reinstate all journeys except Service 747 (Peterhead – Ellon – Aberdeen Airport), the passengers affected now having to transfer from Buchan corridor services to/from Service 727 (City Centre – Airport) within Aberdeen.
- The Council undertook a tendering process in 2021, predominantly in north Aberdeenshire. In the Formartine area, Watermill Coaches were successful with their bids for Service 51 (Fraserburgh – New Pitsligo – Ellon) and the Sunday service on 291 (Methlick – Aberdeen). Central Coaches were the preferred bidder for Service 64 (Blackdog – Aberdeen), whilst Stagecoach retained the remainder of supported Local Bus services.
- The Budget for financial year 2022/23 is all but fully committed, which means that cuts to existing supported service provision would need to be considered if there is a need to reinstate any journeys withdrawn from the commercial network.
- The Under 22 Entitlement Scheme has been rolled out and the number of cards being issued continues to increase. The Council appreciates that this has led to increased and changing demands throughout Aberdeenshire, most of which can be absorbed by the commercial network, but this is being monitored.

Marion Mackay provided the following update:

- The Council operated *A2B dial-a-bus* services provide a door-to-door service, generally for older and disabled people or those unable to access a bus service, Journeys are booked by phoning (01467) 535 333. The Formartine area services are Ellon Town (Monday to Friday); Collieston - Ellon: (Tuesday only); Rothienorman/Oldmeldrum – Inverurie: (Tuesday only) and Turriff Rural and Town services (both Monday to Friday).
- The digital demand responsive *Ready2Go Around Inverurie* was introduced in August 2021 operating in the Inverurie, Oldmeldrum, Inch, Rothienorman, Monymusk, Kemnay and Kintore area, with bus journeys booked through the Ready2Go app on your smartphone or by calling the Council on (01467) 535 333. The service does not have fixed routes or times – these are determined by passenger bookings. When the service was introduced several fixed route bus services were withdrawn including 308 (Turriff – Rothienorman – Inverurie).
- Transport consultants were asked to evaluate the service and concluded: there was an increase in passengers using the bus services compared to pre Covid; new people were utilising the service, with around a quarter making new trips; the service provides benefits, such as reducing social isolation, improving independence, providing health benefits; and there was a high user satisfaction rate. However, the cost of operating the service is expensive and the software system is unable to group passengers as well as expected, which has been raised with the system supplier on an ongoing basis. The consultants recommended that the pilot be extended, with the Council seeking external funding, e.g., from Transport Scotland. The Council has committed to continue operating the pilot service, the alternative options were either to make the service permanent or withdraw the Ready2Go service and re-instate some fixed route journeys. An Inch bus service survey will be undertaken following difficulties experienced by those residing in the area when trying to book a bus.
- Query as to whether the survey will include the Rothienorman area, highlighting various comments raised by those utilising the service who like the service but have suggested ways to improve it.

Marion Mackay confirmed that this survey is only for the Inch area.

- Concerns were raised regarding the proposed withdrawal of the Service 22 (Inverurie Town Service) and the additional passenger demand this will put on an already busy service, resulting in a further decrease in availability for passengers.

Marion Mackay agreed.

- Concerns raised regarding the difficulty in booking buses for those in the Oldmeldrum area travelling to Inverurie and highlighted the need to support current fixed route timetables on Service 240 (Oldmeldrum – Inverurie – Kemnay) and Service 49 (Ellon – Oldmeldrum – Inverurie), coupled with a request for Oldmeldrum to be included in the survey.

Marion Mackay confirmed that the app is designed to divert people to other bus services in the area, such as Service 49 and Service 240 for those residing in Oldmeldrum but won't refuse passengers wishing to travel. She advised that the Council is focussing the survey on Inch because it doesn't have another bus service. She noted the request for future consideration.

- Concerns were raised regarding the previously suggested withdrawal of the part route between Inverurie – Oldmeldrum on Service 49 (Ellon – Oldmeldrum – Inverurie), which would be covered by connecting onto Ready2Go in Oldmeldrum, coupled with concerns about being able to book Ready2Go given current difficulties.

Neil Stewart confirmed that there are currently no plans to revise Service 49.

- It was raised that, at times, passengers travelling on the bus can be diverted whilst on route to their destination, to pick up live bookings in the area, such as anyone travelling within Inverurie when the bus is in the area, resulting in the journey taking longer than expected.

Marion Mackay advised this occurs because the system aims to link journeys. She acknowledged this can cause passenger frustration at times.

- Query as to whether the Ready2Go Around Inverurie service can be extended to serve Barthol Chapel, coupled with the request for provision of a bus stop.

Marion Mackay confirmed that there are no plans to extend the service, as this would put further pressure on Ready2Go and could negatively impact existing passengers. She also clarified that a physical bus stop is not required for Ready2Go as it uses both physical and virtual/notional bus stops within its operating area.

- Query as to whether the service can be extended to serve the new development at Meldrum House, on the A947, around a mile north of Oldmeldrum.

Marion Mackay advised that the service area cannot be increased as this would put further pressure on the service which is already stretched. Such requests could only be considered by changing the overall Ready2Go operating area, e.g. by withdrawing it from another area.

- Concerns were raised that the software system directed a passenger to rail services when trying to book, coupled with passengers frequently unable to book at the time requested due to the increase in demand over time.

Marion Mackay advised that the app is a journey planner so provides details of other public transport as well as Ready2Go. She confirmed again that the Council is aware of problems with booking and such issues are highlighted to the software supplier.

5. Stagecoach Bluebird Update

Marcin Kaminski provided the following update:

- The next service revision within the Formartine area is scheduled for early 2023. Consultation will be undertaken prior to any revisions implemented.
- Following the Covid 19 pandemic, people's travel patterns have changed with more working from home. Patronage has increased on some routes, such as Service 35 (Aberdeen – Banff – Elgin) which has returned to more than 100% of pre-pandemic patronage levels. However, this figure is currently only 69% in the Buchan area.

6. Public Transport Infrastructure / Information

- Susan Watt confirmed that, following issues raised with buses turning within Methlick, investigations have been undertaken to source an alternative location, with all relevant parties involved. This is currently on-going, and an update will be provided at the next meeting in spring 2023.

- Request for the Real-Time facility located on the southbound, B999 at Kirkhill Road (Potterton) to be updated, as the information display is frequently incorrect.

Neil Stewart confirmed that this would be investigated.

- Query as to whether the new bike lockers located at Ellon Park and Ride are accessible, coupled with the comment that people would have to lift electric bikes off the ground in order to store them in the lockers.

Neil Stewart confirmed that this would be investigated.

- Request for the display screens at the stances at Union Square bus station to provide updated Real Time information, when buses depart from a different stance, coupled with the use of a tannoy system to inform passengers.

Sandy Gallacher confirmed that drivers should inform passengers when there is a change to their allocated stances and the tannoy system is now back in operation. He advised that additional signs are displayed at the bus station to remind drivers to inform passengers.

- Request for the Megabus services to be reallocated another stance, nearer the bus station exit, to provide additional space for other bus services.

Sandy Gallacher acknowledged that there are capacity problems at times, but the other stances cannot accommodate the volume of passengers wishing to use long distance services, as well as the longer vehicles allocated to these routes.

7. Physical Accessibility Matters

Neil Stewart confirmed that this section is added to provide an opportunity for disabled people and others with mobility concerns to raise and discuss any physical and other accessibility barriers to using bus services.

- Claim that the ramps on some buses allocated to the Balmedie – Aberdeen corridor are not working, resulting in some passengers being unable to access them.

Sandy Gallacher apologised for this and confirmed that, whilst the ramps are serviced and checked, faults can occasionally arise. He added that the vehicle replacement programme is gradually removing older buses from the fleet.

8. Ellon Services

- Claim that the 1715 hours ex Aberdeen – Ellon (Service 50 Monday to Friday) frequently operates late.

Marcin Kaminski confirmed that this would be investigated.

(Post meeting, Marcin arranged for operation of the journey to be analysed within the time bands covering September and October 2022. The report shows that there are delays mainly at the beginning of the journey, especially in the city centre area. Some of the journeys needed up to 9 minutes to reach the first stop on Union Street, thus indicating traffic congestion issues. He has confirmed that this running time analysis will be accounted for in the implementation of the Buchan corridor revisions next year.)

9. Fyvie, Rothienorman and Oldmeldrum Services

- Requests for some interpeak journeys on Service 35 (Aberdeen – Banff – Elgin) to be re-routed to operate via the Rosemount area instead of Denburn Road, as is the case late evening to serve HM Theatre.

Marcin Kaminski confirmed that this will be considered in the next Moray Area service review, advising that passengers can currently connect on Guild Street with Service 59 (Northfield – City Centre – Balnagask), which operates every 15 minutes.

10. Newburgh and Balmedie Services

- Claim that the 0830 hours ex Peterhead – Aberdeen via Newburgh (Service X63) frequently operates late, at times up to 20 minutes, resulting in passengers from Newburgh having to travel via Ellon to access alternative services.

Marcin Kaminski confirmed that this would be investigated.

(Post meeting, Marcin arranged for operation of the journey to be analysed within the time bands covering September and October 2022. The report shows that the journey is operating mainly on time, with just a couple of delays due to operational issues. He confirmed that this journey will continue to be monitored and if a retiming is required it will be implemented along with the other Buchan corridor revisions).

11. Potterton, Pitmedden and Tarves Services

- Requests for additional journeys on Sundays, in particular an a.m. journey for an approx. 0900 hours arrival in Aberdeen, plus a return journey departing at around 1500 hours.

Neil Stewart confirmed that when Stagecoach Bluebird operated the contracted service on Sundays, they provided these additional journeys on a commercial basis, but the “new” operator, Watermill Coaches, decided that it was not viable to do so. He referred to the current funding situation and explained that this will be considered along with other requests, but the current Sunday service is already one of those ranked quite low in the Council’s Performance Management Framework Model, which considers factors such as demand, cost/passenger, trip purpose, car ownership levels, levels of deprivation, etc.

- Claim that the 0723 hours ex Methlick – Aberdeen (Monday to Friday) frequently operates late.

Marcin Kaminski confirmed that this would be investigated.

(Post meeting, Marcin arranged for operation of the journey to be analysed within the time bands covering September and October 2022. The report shows that there were a couple of late running journeys due to operational issues, but the overall analysis does not indicate any alarming patterns).

- Claim that the exterior of the vehicles is often unclean, including the windows.

Sandy Gallacher confirmed that, whilst this would be investigated, the weather and related road conditions can make it difficult to keep buses clean throughout the whole of the day.

12. Turriff Services

- Request for the Turriff Rural A2B dial-a-bus service to operate some of the journeys as a fixed route timetable, highlighting that the closure of the Cuminestown Health centre has increased the need to attend medical appointments in Turriff. Request to consult with those unable to use the service.

Marion MacKay confirmed that currently all trips need to be booked and so the service varies depending on the bookings made. She noted the requests for consideration. She mentioned that the number of journeys has reduced following the ending of European funding and a reduction in the number of available drivers.

13. **A.O.B**

- Claim that telephone calls to Stagecoach's office in Peterhead are often unanswered. This was coupled with a query as to which telephone numbers to call for journey queries, highlighting that some passengers don't have the Stagecoach app or access to social media.

Marcin Kaminski confirmed that passengers should contact Peterhead Interchange (01779 470077), whilst confirming that this complaint would be investigated. Sandy Gallacher advised that the general Stagecoach Bluebird enquiry number (0345) 241 8000 accesses a call centre based in Perth.

- Requests for the heating systems on Stagecoach's vehicles to be checked prior to the winter months.

Sandy Gallacher confirmed that there is a programme in place for this.

- Thanks, and best wishes, were expressed from the floor to Neil Stewart for all his help and hard work over the years both at Bus Forums and in his daily job, following his announcement that he will be retiring in November 2022.

14. **Next Meeting**

Neil Stewart confirmed that the next meeting would be in Ellon Community Campus in spring 2023. Date to be advised.