

FORMARTINE AREA BUS FORUM

MINUTES OF MEETING ON THURSDAY 6th JUNE 2019

STAFF ROOM, MELDRUM ACADEMY, OLDMELDRUM

In Attendance

Councillor I. Davidson (Aberdeenshire Council) (Chair)

Councillor P. Johnston (Aberdeenshire Council)

Samantha Rawlins (Community Planning Officer, Formartine)

Jan Chalmers (Meldrum, Bourtie and Daviot Community Council)

Caroline Wood (Belhelvie Community Council)

Peter Ridout (Fyvie, Rothienorman & Monquhitter Community Council/Formartine Partnership)

Hilda Drummond (Potterton Bus User)

Ray Kenyon (Newburgh Bus User)

Anne Kenyon (Newburgh Bus User)

Robert Martin (Oldmeldrum Bus User)

Jenny McEwen (Oldmeldrum Former Bus User)

Kaye Cowie (Member of Public)

Ethel McCurrach (Turriff Bus User)

Kathryn Morrison (Prospective Bus User)

Krista Wright (Ellon Bus User)

Sheila Noble (Ellon Bus User)

Sheila McKay (Ellon Bus User)

Jane Charlton (Balmedie Bus User)

Helen Deans (Balmedie Bus User)

Mabel Simpson (Balmedie Bus User)

Vic Deans (Balmedie Bus User)

Dan Wood (Belhelvie Resident)

Beth Jeffrey (Bus User)

Edna Booth (Prospective Bus User)

Myra Stewart (Bus User)

Dee Gibson (Bus User)

Greta Haworth (Bus User)

Rachael Houchen (Bus User)

Tim Dring (Bus User)

Ann Malcolm (Bus User)

Maureen Freakley Bus User)

Gladys Tercher (Bus User)

Roseann Fyfe-Johnston (Bus User)

Murray Cowie (Bains Coaches)

Jamie Reid (Moray and Buchan Operations Manager, Stagecoach North Scotland)

Fraser McBirnie (Assistant Operations Manager, Stagecoach North Scotland)

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

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

Apologies

Jim Bruce (Glack/Daviot Resident and Bus User)

Lorraine Bruce (Glack/Daviot Resident and Bus User)

Pam Young (Newmachar Community Council)

Malcolm Hardy-Randall (Bus User)

Eileen Arthur (Bus User)

Fiona Jones (Bus User)

1. Welcome and Introduction

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

2. Minutes of Meeting on 1st November 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 for a Real-Time Passenger Information facility at Foveran, he confirmed that this is subject to funding and ideally needs to be a Solar powered e-paper display.
- 3.2 In response to the request for a weekday inter-peak return journey (0920 hrs ex Turriff and 1220 hrs ex Inverurie) to be re-routed to serve Meikle Wartle, to provide a facility for those travelling to/from Inverurie for shopping and medical appointments, he confirmed that despite some other journeys on the service being withdrawn, this request was fulfilled by Stagecoach Bluebird at no additional cost to the Council.

Jamie Reid provided the following update on behalf of Stagecoach Bluebird:

- 3.3 In response to the claim that the display screens at Union Square Bus Station do not always display the correct information, resulting in passengers missing their bus service, he confirmed that the screens are subcontracted and are linked into the Real-Time system but this would be investigated.

4. Stagecoach Bluebird Update

Jamie Reid provided the following update:

- 4.1 Service 35 (Aberdeen - Banff - Elgin): new double decker vehicles have been allocated to the corridor and there have been minor re-timings to address punctuality and reliability issues.
- 4.2 Following completion of the AWPR, each corridor continues to be monitored, and introduction of service revisions will be introduced where required.

5. Aberdeenshire Council Update

- 5.1 Neil Stewart confirmed that the Council had to undertake a review of supported Local Bus services to contain spending within the approved Revenue Budget for 2019/2020, resulting in savings of £560,000 across Aberdeenshire. Services in the Formartine Area were as below:

| Service | Route | Revisions & Comments |
|---------|--|---|
| 67 / 68 | Aberdeen - Fraserburgh | 1910 hrs and 2010 hrs from Fraserburgh to Aberdeen via Ellon (Mon - Fri) replaced by one departure at 1940 hrs. 2105 hrs and 2205 hrs from Aberdeen to Fraserburgh via Ellon (Mon - Fri) replaced by one departure at 2135 hrs. |
| 253 | Turriff - Mintlaw - Fraserburgh | 0903 hrs from Turriff to Fraserburgh (Tue & Fri) and 1320 hrs from Fraserburgh to Turriff (Tue & Fri) withdrawn; Alternative services available, for all intermediate settlements affected, to their nearest market towns. |
| 292 | Tarves - Ellon | 0812 hrs from Tarves to Ellon (Mon - Fri) and 1708 hrs from Ellon to Tarves (Mon to Fri) withdrawn. |
| 308 | Aberchirder / Turriff / Rothienorman - Inverurie | 1114 hrs from Aberchirder to Inverurie (Mon - Fri), 1310 hrs from Turriff to Inverurie (Mon - Fri), 1011 hrs from Inverurie to Aberchirder (Mon - Fri) and 1357 hrs from Inverurie to Rothienorman (Mon - Fri) withdrawn. Remainder of Monday to Friday service plus Saturday service unaffected. |
| 777 | Oldmeldrum - Westhill - Dyce | 0640 hrs from Oldmeldrum to Dyce (Mon - Fri) and 1640 hrs from Dyce to Oldmeldrum (Mon - Fri) withdrawn; Alternatives available for the vast majority of passenger journeys currently being undertaken, albeit requiring interchange in some cases. |

It was raised from the floor that it was disappointing that the Area Bus Forums were programmed for after implantation of the above revisions, resulting in their being no face to face consultation undertaken by the Council.

Neil Stewart confirmed that the associated Council Budget was not confirmed until early February 2019, by which time the Bus Forums had already been scheduled for later than usual, due to passenger transport contracts in south Aberdeenshire being tendered in February/March 2019. He added that consultation had been undertaken in February by means of press releases in the Press and Journal and local papers, as well as on the Council's web site, inviting comments from members of the public.

6. Bus Service Requests/Development

Neil Stewart referred to the papers circulated, detailing pending and fulfilled service requests in the Marr Area, and asked if there were any further requests.

- 6.1 The request for a 2215 hours ex Aberdeen - Banff (Service 35) to operate via Union Terrace, to allow people to return home from HM Theatre and the Music Hall was fulfilled by Stagecoach Bluebird with effect from 11 February 2019.

This was welcomed from the floor.

- 6.2 Request for provision of a return journey between Oldmeldrum and Inverurie on weekdays to connect with rail services to/from Inverurie at peak times. This followed the withdrawal of such journeys on Service 777 (Oldmeldrum - Inverurie - Dyce Industrial Estate) on 15 April 2019, by the Council.

Neil Stewart confirmed that, whilst the Council could not reinstate such journeys, he would discuss with Bains Coaches the possibility of registering early morning and early evening journeys between Oldmeldrum and Inverurie on weekdays, as the same operator had been successful in its bid for the contracted Service 421 (Alford – Kemnay - Inverurie) in the tendering process, so there will be a need to position a bus between Oldmeldrum and Alford at these times of day.

7. Public Transport Infrastructure / Information

Neil Stewart provided the following update:

- Ellon Park and Ride

Work has been delayed at the facility due to issues with the water mains location. Subject to findings, it is anticipated that the works will commence in the next couple of months.

- Oldmeldrum Hub

Regarding the land for the car park, the terms are still being negotiated between the Council's estates and the Landlord's legal team.

It was raised from the floor that the project has been delayed since 2017 and parking within the town is getting more problematic.

8. Service 35 (Aberdeen - Elgin)

- 8.1 Query as to why the destination screens at the front of the vehicles read "Oldmeldrum for Elgin" instead of "Elgin" when travelling further north, resulting in passenger confusion.

Jamie Reid explained confirmed that this is due to the service being split into separate registrations (i.e. Aberdeen to Oldmeldrum; Oldmeldrum to Macduff; Macduff to Buckie; and Buckie to Elgin) in order to conform with drivers' hours' regulations.

- 8.2 In general, the introduction of the double new decker vehicles was welcomed, with comments that they are comfortable, have improved heating systems, and are more reliable in terms of arriving on time and fewer breakdowns. The drivers on the corridor also received compliments.

Jamie Reid welcomed this feedback.

- 8.3 However, there was a complaint that the vehicles are not comfortable for long journeys and that there is limited space for luggage and cycles.

Jamie Reid confirmed that there had been comments on a lack of comfort on longer journeys raised at the Bus Forum in Macduff. Regarding space, he confirmed that this had been investigated but unfortunately it would create a weight issue on the vehicles.

- 8.4 Complaint regarding buses, operating in both directions, meeting at the Oldmeldrum Interchange, resulting in other vehicles being unable to pass, highlighting at one point both drivers were outside their vehicles speaking to each other.

Jamie Reid confirmed that this would be investigated.

9. Service 50 (Ellon – Newburgh)

- 9.1 Complaint regarding some drivers operating via the incorrect route within Newburgh, omitting Eider Road, resulting in passengers not being uplifted.

Susan Watt confirmed that discussions had been held with Stagecoach Bluebird, with the operator confirming that instructions have been issued to drivers to ensure they are adhering to the correct route. However, she advised that the situation is being monitored as there are still reports of some drivers operating via Merlin Terrace instead.

10. Service 54 (Aberdeen - Balmedie - Ellon and Ellon Town) (incorporating former Service 62: Aberdeen - Balmedie - Ellon)

- 10.1 Request for additional journeys between Ellon and Balmedie for those attending medical appointments in Ellon.

Jamie Reid confirmed that this will be considered in the next review.

- 10.2 Complaint regarding the Ellon Town service being reduced to two hourly, resulting in fewer passengers being able to utilise the service.

Neil Stewart confirmed that the majority of the journeys within the town are financially supported by the Council and that most areas are served on an hourly basis.

Councillor Davidson confirmed that some passengers also have the option of using the Ellon A2B dial-a-bus.

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

- 10.3 Request for the journey time between Ellon Town and Aberdeen to be reduced, as it can currently take up to 1 hour and 50 minutes from some areas of Ellon.

Neil Stewart confirmed that passengers can travel from parts of the town on Service 54 to either Market Street Interchange or Ellon Park and Ride, where they can connect with a Buchan Express service to Aberdeen running approximately every 20 minutes.

It was raised from the floor that buses can miss each other by a few minutes.

- 10.4 Claim regarding frequent non operation of journeys or drivers operating via the incorrect route around Knockothie (Ellon), resulting in passengers being left stranded. This was coupled with a claim that it is impossible to make contact with Stagecoach Bluebird by telephone regarding these issues.

Jamie Reid asked for times and dates, following which it was agreed that he speak to the complainant after the meeting.

- 10.5 Councillor Johnston echoed the comments regarding the journey times, citing the example of buses operating via Denmore Road (Denmore Industrial Estate), where traffic is frequently delayed, particularly at peak times. He added that feedback from constituents suggested very low passenger usage to/from that area.

Jamie Reid confirmed that these comments would be reported back to colleagues and included in a future review.

- 10.6 Request for all journeys on Service 54 to revert to operating via the full length of King Street (Aberdeen), rather than via Mounthooly, to allow passengers to travel to/from the Community Health and Care Village on Frederick Street.

Jamie Reid confirmed that this would also be relayed to colleagues in the Commercial team.

- 10.7 Caroline Wood (Belhelvie Community Council) informed the Forum that a Transport Survey had been undertaken in the area covering Balmedie, Belhelvie, Blackdog, Potterton and Whitecarins and she highlighted the main results as follows:

- Many residents unhappy with the Service 54 route no longer serving the 'Health Village' on Frederick Street and Morrisons Supermarket on King Street.
- Requests for additional journeys to serve Eigie Road (Balmedie), with the suggestion that Service 63 (Peterhead - Balmedie - Aberdeen) be rerouted via Eigie Road instead of Old Road, to provide an hourly service.
- Requests for newer buses to be allocated to Service 54, highlighting poor quality, reliability issues and non-operation of journeys.

- Requests for a bus service to operate via the village of Blackdog.
- Claim that some drivers are not properly trained in how to use the wheelchair access facilities on the buses.
- Request for drivers to try to ensure that elderly and/or disabled passengers can access the 'priority seating' on the Buchan Xpress vehicles.
- Claim that complaints are not always dealt with, with no replies to phone calls or emails.

Jamie Reid confirmed that Stagecoach management would look at all these comments.

- 10.8 Request for the service to be re-routed to serve Blackdog, with operating into the village, highlighting the long walk to the bus stops on the slip roads at the A90/A92 roundabout.

Councillor Johnston confirmed that the Council is currently investigating the provision of a new footpath and a site for a bus turning circle to allow buses to access the village, but added that it would be a commercial decision for Stagecoach Bluebird to make in regard to re-routing any of their bus service(s).

Neil Stewart agreed and advised that there is approval in principle to build a footpath adjacent to the A92 but this is proving challenging from a technical perspective due to the utilities in the area e.g. gas main.

He confirmed that, following a procurement exercise, the Mainstream School Transport contract to/from the village will turn at Hareburn Terrace, with effect from 20 August 2019, as it will be operated by a small vehicle. As there is no additional Council funding available, it had been hoped that the successful operator would consider the provision of at least one return journey between Blackdog and Aberdeen outwith school times on a trial basis, but this has been ruled out.

11. Services 60 - 68 (Aberdeen - Peterhead / Fraserburgh)

- 11.1 Repeated request for additional peak time journeys to/from Aberdeen, particularly during the p.m. period, to be re-routed via Ellon town centre, as there are considerable gaps during these periods and a high proportion of passengers cannot drive to/from Ellon Park & Ride.

Jamie Reid confirmed that it is difficult to strike a balance between the demands of Ellon passengers and those travelling longer distances to the likes of Fraserburgh and Peterhead, but this will be considered in the corridor review.

- 11.2 With reference to the bus stops located at the Quay (Newburgh), it was pointed out that Stagecoach management agreed to the use of this location as a timing point for southbound journeys a number of years ago, as this meant that buses could not operate through Newburgh ahead of schedule. As this timing point has been removed, people are being left behind at bus stops by early running buses operating to the timing point on Main Street (at Knockhall Road), where they often sit for a few minutes.

Jamie Reid confirmed that this would be investigated.

- 11.3 Query as to when new buses will replace the Buchan Express vehicles.

Jamie Reid confirmed that there is no fixed timescale but it is unlikely to be in the next five years.

12. Services 290/291 (Aberdeen - Tarves/Methlick)

- 12.1 Complaint regarding the frequent non-operation and late running of journeys on the corridor, in particular between January and March 2019. It was highlighted that on one occasion a vehicle operated late in the p.m. peak due to running out of fuel.

Jamie Reid confirmed that this must have been an isolated occurrence as fuelling should only be required at the end of a shift.

Councillor Johnston confirmed that, whilst reliability may have improved lately during the peak periods, this is not the case during the inter-peak period due to numerous breakdowns, non-operation, late running, and drivers not being aware of diversions during road closures.

Susan Watt confirmed that the issues to which Councillor Johnston, in conjunction with numerous emails received from various passengers, had necessitated a meeting between Council officers and Stagecoach Bluebird on 26th April 2019. Since the meeting, service reliability appears to have improved and the Council will continue to monitor its operation and any contract breaches will be penalised accordingly.

- 12.2 Query as to why buses are garaged at Fyvie, particularly during the winter months, as this can result in early morning/a.m. peak journeys not operating due to icy conditions. This was coupled with a claim that the heating systems on the buses often don't operate correctly.

Jamie Reid confirmed that the company is currently investigating alternative locations to garage their vehicles. He acknowledged that it is very difficult to heat the buses when the outside temperature is several degrees below zero and that space heaters are often used to heat the interior of the vehicles prior to starting the first journey.

- 12.3 Query as to whether Stagecoach Bluebird is penalised for non-operation and late running of journeys.

Neil Stewart confirmed that all subsidised services are subject to a Contract Performance Management System, whereby liquidated damages can be applied against contractors who fail to adhere to the Terms and Conditions of Contract. This is in the form of financial penalties and also a points system, the accumulation of which could result in termination.

- 12.4 Request for information to be more readily available to inform passengers on breakdowns and late operation through alternative social media or Real-Time, not just twitter. It was confirmed that, due to the volume of 'incidents' on the corridor, a Facebook page for Service 290/291 has been set up by passengers to inform each other of experiences and issues on the corridor.

- 12.5 Complaint regarding the quality of buses operating on the corridor and whether the company has plans to allocate new vehicles in the near future. This was coupled with a request for WiFi access on vehicles.

Jamie Reid confirmed that there was currently no plans to introduce new vehicles on the corridor and that it would be too expensive to provide WiFi access at the moment, as it costs around £300 per unit and it is not a commercial bus service.

- 12.6 Claim that drivers are not properly informed of route diversions during road closures, with particular reference to recent works on the B999 (Service 290/291: Aberdeen - Methlick). The drivers were complimented for trying their best in such difficult circumstances.

Jamie Reid confirmed that the communication of such information would be reviewed by management.

13. Service 747 (Peterhead - Ellon - Dyce - Stonehaven - Montrose)

- 13.1 Query as to whether the Service picks up/drops off passengers at the Tipperty bus stops.

Jamie Reid confirmed that that this was the case and to inform him of any instances of this not happening.

14. A.O.B

- 14.1 Complaint regarding Stagecoach Bluebird's complaints procedures, claiming that responses are rarely received within the stipulated timescales (i.e. 14 days).

Jamie Reid confirmed that all complaints should be responded to within 14 days and he would discuss the matter with anyone affected, after the meeting.

- 14.2 Repeated request for 'school buses' to operate via the bypass instead of through the centre of Oldmeldrum, as this can result in traffic issues.

Susan Watt confirmed that the operators had previously been instructed accordingly and that she would arrange for the matter to be raised again.

15. Date of Next Meeting

- 15.1 Councillor Davidson confirmed that the next meeting of the Forum is planned to take place in Ellon in late autumn 2019. Full details will be advised in due course.