

KINCARDINE AND MEARNS AREA BUS FORUM

MINUTES OF MEETING ON WEDNESDAY 5th OCTOBER 2022

COUNCIL CHAMBERS, VIEWMOUNT, STONEHAVEN

In Attendance

Councillor W. Agnew (Aberdeenshire Council) (Chair)

Councillor S. Dickinson (Aberdeenshire Council)

Councillor J. Goodhall (Aberdeenshire Council)

Councillor C. Victor (Aberdeenshire Council)

Councillor M. Sullivan (Aberdeenshire Council)

Councillor K. Stelfox (Aberdeenshire Council)

Councillor A. Evison (Aberdeenshire Council)

Neil Stewart (Principal Officer, Aberdeenshire Council)

Susan Watt (Senior Transport Officer, Aberdeenshire Council)

Norman Scott (Stagecoach Bluebird)

Paul Dyche (Stagecoach Bluebird)

Peter Flockhart (Newtonhill, Muchalls and Cammachmore Community Council)

Ainslie Thomson (Bus User)

Apologies

Ian Bennett

Sheena Adam

1. Welcome and Introduction

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

2. Minutes of Meeting on 31st October 2019

The minutes were approved.

3. Matters arising from the Minutes

- In response to the request for Service 8A/8C (Stonehaven Town Service) timings to be amended to improve connections on Barclay Street, Paul Dyche confirmed that currently the service operates on a 30-minute headway, providing connections where possible at Barclay Street, with buses heading north and south, and any revisions would affect the scheduling of the whole timetable, so there are no plans to revise the service.
- In response to the request for Service 8A/8C (Stonehaven Town Service) to serve Stonehaven Community Hospital, Paul Dyche confirmed that, due to insufficient time within the current timetable, and the implications of rescheduling, there are no plans to revise the timetable.
- It is currently not commercially viable to retard the 2155 hours ex Aberdeen – Portlethen (Monday to Saturday).
- Neil Stewart confirmed that a Stonehaven Traffic Management Review is being undertaken, which included public consultation up until April 2022. Councillor Agnew passed an update to Neil, this allowing him to confirm that feedback supported additional parking on Barclay Street, with the bus stops relocated to Allardice Street.

- In response to the request for Service 7B (Stonehaven – Newtonhill – Portlethen – Aberdeen) to be speeded up by omitting some places currently served, Paul Dyche confirmed that each area requires to be covered by this service, so there are no plans to do this.
- In response to the request to commence the operation of Service 8A/8C (Stonehaven Town Service) earlier on Saturday mornings, Paul Dyche confirmed that there are currently no plans to revise the service, but the situation would continue to be monitored.

4. Stagecoach Bluebird Update

Paul Dyche confirmed that whilst bus service revisions will be implemented on the 31 October 2022 in the Donside, Kemnay and Inverurie areas, following a service review, there are no plans to undertake a review of commercial services covering the Kincardine and Mearns Area this year.

5. Aberdeenshire Council Update

Neil Stewart provided the following update:

- Early in the Covid 19 pandemic, a small number of services in the Kincardine and Mearns 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 we were able to reinstate all the journeys concerned.
- Following discussions with Stagecoach Bluebird, the company agreed to provide additional early morning journeys from Auchenblae at 0606 hrs and 0717 hrs to Laurencekirk on Council supported Service 26 (Stonehaven – Laurencekirk/Luthermuir) to connect with rail services. No additional funding was required from the Council, therefore usage of the journeys, which were introduced on 22 August 2022, will be monitored by the company.
- 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.

6. Public Transport Infrastructure / Information

- Claim that the information displayed in the timetable cases in Newtonhill is incorrect, with the example of St Michael's Road outside the Primary School.

This led to further claims that the information at both Stonehaven (Barclay Street) and Portlethen (Asda) is also incorrect.

Neil Stewart expressed his surprise as such information is provided by electronic registrations submitted by operators, so it should be up to date. He confirmed that this would be investigated as a matter of urgency.

- Further claim that the Real Time electronic display units are not working on Barclay Street (Stonehaven) and Muirend Road, Asda (Portlethen).

Neil Stewart confirmed that this would be investigated at the same time and rectified.

- It was raised that the bus shelters located in Newtonhill have been targeted by graffiti.

Neil Stewart confirmed that this would also be investigated and rectified.

- Request for the replacement of the shelter which had to be removed from the A92 at Dunnottar Castle, following extensive damage.

Neil Stewart confirmed that this is currently being progressed.

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.

- On-going concerns were raised regarding the coaches allocated to Service X7 (Aberdeen – Stonehaven – Perth), relating to those with restricted mobility experiencing difficulties in accessing the stairways to the upstairs seating, if there are no seats available downstairs.

Paul Dyche confirmed that minor improvements had been undertaken, these being restricted by the structure of the interior of the vehicles.

- Request for the displays in timetable cases at bus stops/shelters to be printed in a larger font and for them to be at a lower level where possible. No specific locations were highlighted.

Neil Stewart confirmed that larger font is not possible as the system is standardised, but he would forward the comments to colleagues for investigation.

- Request for a footpath to be installed on the A92 at Hillside, next to the flyer over (southbound) to allow accessibility for those boarding and alighting from the bus stop.

Neil Stewart confirmed that this would be investigated.

8. Laurencekirk Services

- Request for service enhancements between Laurencekirk and Stonehaven, serving surrounding villages and connecting with services at Stonehaven. There was reference to increased demand from those entitled to Under 22s bus passes.

Neil Stewart confirmed that the existing supported Service 26 (Laurencekirk – Stonehaven), which serves Fordoun, Auchenblae and Drumlithie, connects with commercial bus services at Stonehaven (Barclay Street). He added that supported Service 9 (Laurencekirk – Montrose) can also provide an opportunity for onward travel to the south.

(Post Meeting: it is acknowledged that neither service operates in the evenings or on Sundays, and Service 26 also does not operate on Saturdays. The situation will continue to be monitored, bearing in mind the reference to funding under Item 4).

9. Mearns Coast Services

- Request for reinstatement of the evening journeys withdrawn from Service X7 with effect from 3 October 2022, with reference to the fact that the last northbound bus on Mondays to Saturdays is now 1805 hours ex Perth - Aberdeen (via Montrose 2014 hrs and Stonehaven 2027 hrs).

Paul Dyche confirmed that this was a commercial decision by Stagecoach East Scotland, so would relay this to that operator.

(For information, there is a 2052 hrs departure from Stonehaven to Aberdeen (Service 7B), operated by Stagecoach Bluebird).

- Concerns were expressed over the reliability of Service X7, with journeys being cancelled at short notice. There was reference to the weekday a.m. peak northbound journey departing Arbroath at 06:35 hours (via St Cyrus 0714 hrs; Inverbervie 0729 hrs and Stonehaven 0750 hrs) and the impact on workers and students, as well as the last southbound journey from Aberdeen departing at 2250 hours Monday to Saturday (2150 hrs Sunday), potentially leaving people with no means of alternative transport, stranded in Aberdeen.

Due to matters out with their control, Stagecoach East Scotland could not send a representative on the night.

(Post meeting: Stagecoach East Scotland met with the Council and explained the difficulties they have been experiencing with the recruitment and retention of drivers, as well as driver sickness. A number of drivers left the company during, and shortly after, the worst of the pandemic, and no recruitment could take place during that period. The company has since increased the rates of pay, introduced more family friendly shifts, and held a vigorous recruitment campaign. 35 new drivers are currently undergoing training which takes 3 months, but those who decide to leave their jobs can do so at one week's notice. Service X7 has suffered more than most as fewer drivers are trained on this long distance route.

In the meantime, senior management at the company have confirmed that operation of the above two journeys would be prioritised i.e the a.m. peak journey to Aberdeen and the last timetabled bus south from the city.)

- Thanks were expressed to Jim Bowe (Principal Officer, Information & Infrastructure) for the work undertaken to access the bus stops on the A92 at Johnshaven and for his liaison with the Community Council in working towards a solution to the issue.

10. Newtonhill and Portlethen Services

- Request for Stagecoach Bluebird to consider the provision of a return journey between Chapelton and Newtonhill Primary School on a commercial basis. This follows the Council's decision to withdraw the contracted return journey on the basis that there is a safe walking route to/from school for children, if accompanied by a responsible adult, and they live within 2 miles walking distance from the school. It was stated that as many as 30 children would likely travel on such a service, with potential revenue to be accrued from the use of Under 22s bus passes.

Paul Dyche confirmed that he would relay this request to senior management but advised that parents/carers would need to supervise their children if such a service was provided.

- Request for Service X7 (Perth – Stonehaven – Aberdeen) to serve Portlethen (Asda) bus stop and a query as to why the service operates the length of Union Street.

Paul Dyche confirmed that the additional time required to serve Portlethen would create timing issues with the service and that there is demand to/from various bus stops on Union Street.

(Post meeting, Stagecoach East Scotland have confirmed that they will review the number of bus stops served on Union Street but there are no plans to serve Portlethen. Stagecoach Bluebird have already confirmed that they currently have no plans to serve Portlethen on their component of service X7 between Aberdeen and Stonehaven).

- Concerns were raised that, at times, the 0735 hours ex Portlethen - Aberdeen is operated by a minibus, resulting in some passengers not being uplifted due to insufficient seating capacity. It was stated that a minibus operated on Monday 3 October 2022.

Paul Dyche confirmed that arrangements would be made for no minibuses to be scheduled again on this journey.

- Query as to how many minibuses are based at Stagecoach's Stonehaven depot and whether there are plans to introduce electric or hydrogen buses on the corridor.

Paul Dyche confirmed that 8 minibuses are based at the depot. He also confirmed that the company has recently invested in 13 new electric buses for allocation within Aberdeen City. He added that further electric vehicles are already on order, though he could not confirm where they would be allocated.

- Claim that Berrymuir Road (Portlethen) is misspelt on the Service 7 vehicles' destination screens.

Paul Dyche confirmed that this would be investigated.

- Thanks were expressed to both Stagecoach companies for their operation of services during a testing time for their drivers when there were road works in Newtonhill whilst Caledonia Water Alliance undertook mains upgrades.

11. **Stonehaven Services**

- Request for additional journeys to operate between Stonehaven and Portlethen to provide a link for those travelling for work, shopping, dentist, etc.

Paul Dyche confirmed that Service 8 (Stonehaven – Portlethen) provides 3 inter-peak return journeys from Stonehaven to Portlethen (Monday to Saturday) but acknowledged that this would not fulfil all the travel requests.

(For information, Service 7B (Aberdeen – Chapelton/Stonehaven) links Stonehaven and Portlethen in the early mornings and during the evenings: Monday to Saturday).

- Request for Service 7 (Portlethen – Aberdeen) to be re-routed within Aberdeen to serve Wellington Road and Cove.

Paul Dyche confirmed that journeys which had previously served Wellington Road were withdrawn due to limited passenger numbers, whilst agreeing to record this request.

12. A.O.B

- Query as to who sets the fares for bus services on the Stonehaven – Newtonhill - Portlethen corridor. It was highlighted that there are discrepancies in the fares structure in terms of distance travelled e.g. more expensive per mile between Aberdeen and either Portlethen or Newtonhill, than from Aberdeen to Stonehaven.

There was a further comment from the floor that there are similar discrepancies on the Mearns coast.

Paul Dyche confirmed that the bus company sets the fares on these services, and he would report this to senior management.

Neil Stewart advised that there are usually commercial considerations per operating corridor, rather than a standard charge per mile.

- Query as to whether Stagecoach receives reimbursement from the Scottish Government of the full fare equivalent for passengers travelling with concession cards.

Susan Watt confirmed that, for the use of entitlement cards by those aged 60 and those with a disability, operators currently receive reimbursement of 55.9% of the adult single fare. In the case of Under-22 entitlement cards, reimbursement is 81.2% of the adult single fare for those aged 16 years and over, and 43.6% of the adult single fare for those under 16 years of age.

(For information: Transport Scotland is responsible for compensating bus operators for carrying these passengers. It has the objective that bus operators should be financially “no better off and no worse off” because of their participation in the scheme).

- Request for consideration to be given to the next Bus Forum meeting being a hybrid event, using *Teams* or *Zoom*, for those unable to attend.

Neil Stewart confirmed that this would be considered.

- Thanks 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 would be retiring in November 2022.

13. Next Meeting

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