

MARR AREA BUS FORUM

MINUTES OF MEETING ON WEDNESDAY 5TH JUNE 2019

VICTORY HALL, ABOYNE

In Attendance

Councillor G. Blackett (Aberdeenshire Council) (Chair)

Councillor E. Durno (Aberdeenshire Council)

Jane Angus (Ballater and Crathie Community Council)

Carol Reid (Torphins Community Council)

Liz Moore (Torphins Community Council)

Alex T. Mann (Kincardine O'Neil Community Association)

Alasdair Colquhoun (Braemar Community Council)

Jeanie Rowand (Bus User, Ballater)

Betty Henry (Bus User)

Elda Ewen (Bus User, Banchory)

Mary Taylor (Bus User, Banchory)

Ian Loudon (Bus User)

Anna Loudon (Bus User)

Marijke Stallaert (Feughdee West Community Council)

Lynsey Craig (Feughdee West Community Council)

Carole Paterson (Bus User, Braemar)

David Geddes (Bus User, Braemar)

David Souter (Bus Driver)

Roland Armbruszt (Ballater Resident and Bus Driver)

Daniel Laird (Commercial Director, Stagecoach North Scotland)

Neil Stewart (Principal Officer, Aberdeenshire Council)

Susan Watt (Senior Transport Officer, Aberdeenshire Council)

Apologies

Councillor M. Ingleby (Aberdeenshire Council)

Councillor P. Gibb (Aberdeenshire Council)

Steven Murray (Bus User)

1. Welcome and Introduction

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

2. Minutes of the Meeting on 20th September 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 comments regarding the reliability of Real Time Information (RTI) on the Deeside corridor, he advised that a work study on RTI data reliability is currently being undertaken, with data collection and a presentation package to the suppliers to be completed

by 30th June. He also confirmed that approximately 3 months will be required to allow the suppliers to analyse the data, including a number of site visits, and it is anticipated that the study will be concluded by end October 2019.

- 3.2 In response to the request for installation of hard standing at the two bus stops in Hill of Banchory, at and opposite the Deeside Dance Centre, he confirmed that this has been completed.

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

- 3.3 In response to the request for timetable publicity to identify journeys on Services 201/202/203 (Aberdeen - Ballater/Braemar) which can carry bicycles, he advised that this hadn't been actioned yet, but was still under review pending confirmation of vehicle allocations.

Councillor Blackett advised that it was important for those currently using the service and tourists coming to the area, for vehicles to be able to accommodate cycles.

4. Stagecoach Bluebird Update

Daniel Laird confirmed the following:

- 4.1 Aberdeenshire Council has undertaken a review of supported Local Bus services (see 5. below), which resulted in subsidised journeys/services operated by Stagecoach being withdrawn or revised. As a consequence of this, there were significant reductions on the Deeside corridor, in particular on a Sunday, but the Council has agreed to fund a shuttle bus between Ballater and Braemar until at least the end of the financial year. He added that further changes will be implemented in August to address reliability issues on the corridor, as well as other services in the Marr Area.
- 4.2 New double deck vehicles were allocated to Service 35 (Aberdeen - Banff - Elgin), with the majority of coaches transferred from that corridor to the Deeside corridor.
- 4.3 A new Engineer Manager has joined the company and he will be assessing vehicles allocated to the Deeside corridor, as well as the company's depot in Ballater.
- 4.4 Stagecoach North Scotland will continue to bid to Stagecoach Group for new vehicles each year.

5. Aberdeenshire Council Update

Neil Stewart referred to the handout (also provided separately) and gave the following 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 Marr Area were as below:

Service	Route	Revisions & Comments
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201	Aberdeen - Aboyne	2115 hrs from Aberdeen to Aboyne (Sunday) will terminate in Banchory.
201	Aboyne - Torphins	2117 hrs from Aboyne to Torphins on Fridays withdrawn.
201	Aberdeen - Braemar	Sunday withdrawals between Braemar and Ballater replaced by a shuttle bus until further notice. Stagecoach have withdrawn the Sunday service via Lumphanan.
204	Strachan - Banchory - Aberdeen via South Deeside Road	0715 hrs from Strachan to Aberdeen (Mon - Fri) and 1720 hrs from Aberdeen to Strachan (Mon - Fri) withdrawn; No alternatives to/from Strachan or via South Deeside Road. There are alternatives between Banchory and Aberdeen via North Deeside Road.
218	Alford - Westhill/Aberdeen	1812 hrs ex Alford to Elrick (Mon - Fri) and 1906 hrs ex Elrick to Alford (Mon - Fri) journeys, connecting with Service X17 (Elrick - Westhill - Aberdeen), are withdrawn.
231	Alford - Huntly	Monday to Friday service, comprising 4 return journeys, withdrawn; Schoolday return journey departing Alford at 0750 hrs and returning from Huntly at 1552 hrs is unaffected. Reduced inter-peak service to be provided by an A2B dial-a-bus service. 1355 hrs from Alford to Huntly (Saturday) and 1452 hrs from Huntly to Alford (Saturday) withdrawn. There is still a return journey on Saturdays, departing Alford at 0955 hrs and returning from Huntly at 1152 hrs.
301	Macduff - Aberchirder - Huntly	Saturday service, comprising 2 return journeys, withdrawn; Aberchirder has an alternative Saturday service to/from Turriff and Inverurie (Service 308).
417	Lumsden - Inch	0640 hrs from Lumsden to Inch (Mon - Fri) and 1803 hrs from Inch to Lumsden (Mon - Fri) withdrawn.
421	Alford / Kemnay - Inverurie	1820 hrs from Alford to Inverurie (Mon - Fri), 1905 hrs from Inverurie to Alford (Mon - Fri), 1845 hrs from Alford to Inverurie (Saturday), 2127 hrs from Inverurie to Kemnay (Saturday), and Sunday service, comprising 3 return journeys, withdrawn; Alternative evening and Sunday services to/from Aberdeen only.

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 Request for Service 501 (Braemar - Blairgowrie) to be re-instated over the summer months, highlighting that the service would require to be advertised widely as it was considered that many residents and tourists were unaware that it operated last time and this would have which affected usage.

Daniel Laird confirmed that the service was not commercially viable. He advised that its reinstatement would be considered and that he would appreciate local support and input if this is to be realised.

7. Public Transport Infrastructure/Information

Neil Stewart welcomed requests for bus stops, bus shelters and related transport infrastructure.

- 7.1 Councillor Blackett requested a Real-Time facility at the bus stop in Braemar.

Neil Stewart confirmed that this would be investigated.

- 7.2 Query regarding the Real Time screens, at times, displays a countdown to the bus arriving, then it drops off the screen, with the bus not arriving.

Daniel Laird confirmed that the operator, Council, and supplier, are aware of the issues, which are being investigated (see 3.1 above).

- 7.3 Complaint that the Braemar to Ballater Sunday “shuttle service” is not included in the timetable leaflet for Deeside, meaning that many people are not aware that the service is operating.

Daniel Laird confirmed that the service will be registered to charge fares with effect from 25 August 2019 and the leaflet will be updated accordingly. He also advised that the full Sunday timetable is available on the company’s website.

Neil Stewart confirmed that the decision to re-instate the Sunday service between Ballater and Braemar was taken by the Council with insufficient notice given to Stagecoach in order to update their paper leaflets.

- 7.4 Complaint that the above leaflet was not available until a week after the changes were implemented on 15 April 2019.

Daniel Laird apologised and advised that there had been an issue with the printers, resulting in leaflet distribution being delayed by a week.

- 7.5 Complaint regarding Stagecoach Bluebird vehicles regularly taking layover of up to 10 minutes at High Street Interchange (Banchory), resulting in other buses being unable to access the bus stop and creating an issue for other parked vehicles.

Daniel Laird confirmed that this would be investigated.

- 7.6 Claim that some people are unaware of the current road closure on Hill of Banchory, resulting in passengers missing the bus, coupled with a request for information to be available through social media and posters.

Daniel Laird confirmed that the company always imparts such information through social media and Traveline Scotland.

Susan Watt confirmed that posters are currently displayed at the affected bus stops, and advised that the road closure has been extended, therefore new notices will be posted during the current week.

8. Service X17 (Aberdeen - Westhill)

- 8.1 Query as why the service frequency had been reduced from every 10 to 30 minutes on the corridor.

Daniel Laird advised that the service operates every 15 minutes during the daytime and is reduced to 30 minutes in the evenings and on Sundays.

He advised that discussions have been held with Aberdeen City Council regarding potential infrastructure improvements which could deliver bus priority measures within the City, in particular on the Queens Road corridor, as services on this route have been adversely affected by traffic queues on A944 at the junctions to the Western Peripheral Route, resulting in late operation at peak times.

9. Service 201/202/203 (Aberdeen - Banchory - Ballater - Braemar)

- 9.1 Repeated complaints regarding poor quality vehicles being allocated to the corridor, resulting in frequent non running and breakdowns.

Daniel Laird acknowledged that the frequency of vehicle breakdowns and faults on the corridor was not acceptable throughout the 12 months to March 2019, but there has been a marked reduction since April 2019 with the allocation of newer coaches on the corridor.

He also confirmed that the company's vehicle procurement procedures involve the submission of bids annually to the parent company (Stagecoach Group) in Perth each year. This year a bid was put forward for new vehicles on the corridor but it was unsuccessful.

He also advised that it is a difficult economic climate for bus operators, referring to the following:

- Shortfall in Transport Scotland's Budget for Concessionary Travel of £6 million last financial year, resulting in operators not receiving payments for carrying entitlement card holders for a 3 week period.
- Bus Service Operators' Grant (fuel duty rebate) has been reduced.
- Grants available from the Scottish Government for lower carbon emission vehicles and related incentives have been reduced.

- 9.2 Councillor Blackett confirmed that she continues to receive complaints regarding the volume of breakdowns and reliability issues on the corridor. She referred to the recent breakdown of the 0745 hours from Braemar to Aboyne Academy, resulting in children being late for a school excursion, and the 1635 hours from Braemar operating late on 30 May 2019.

Daniel Laird acknowledged the breakdown but confirmed that the company's investigation found the 1635 hours journey to have only operated 1 minute late.

- 9.3 Repeated claim regarding a lack of consistency of vehicles on the corridor, including the use of 'urban-type' buses which are considered uncomfortable and not appropriate for routes of such distance.

Daniel Laird acknowledged that there has been a higher than normal allocation of other types of vehicles on the corridor until April 2019 but, since then, the vast majority of journeys should be operated by coaches.

- 9.4 Claim regarding insufficient seating capacity being provided during the p.m. peak period from Aberdeen due to passengers boarding and alighting within the City.

Daniel Laird confirmed that the service is registered to carry such passengers as the income generated contributes to the commercial viability of the service, including the frequency provided.

- 9.5 Query as to whether there are reliability and punctuality rates for the corridor and, if so, are these records available to the public.

Daniel Laird confirmed that punctuality records are available and he would arrange for these to be provided along with the minutes of the meeting.

Following the meeting, Daniel Laird confirmed that from 30 March to 1 June 2019, the service operated over 99.6% of the scheduled mileage on the corridor.

- 9.6 Query as to whether Stagecoach Bluebird were aware of the decision to reduce the speed limit on certain sections of road between Peterculter and Aberdeen so it is 30 mph for the entire stretch.

Daniel Laird confirmed that he was unaware and it could have a negative impact on the timetable.

- 9.7 Query regarding the recent Council procurement exercise which resulted in Stagecoach Bluebird continuing to be the only operator on the corridor.

Daniel Laird confirmed that any suitably qualified bus and/or coach operator can decide to register a local bus service on a commercial basis with the Traffic Commissioner. He also advised that the company must tender in competition with other operators for journeys and services supported by the Council and, in the recent local authority procurement exercise in south Aberdeenshire, whilst Stagecoach was successful in retaining the contracted journeys on the Deeside corridor, as well as several other Local Bus service contracts, the company was unsuccessful in its bids for a number of other transport contracts in the area.

- 9.8 Request for limited stop or express journeys between Braemar and Aberdeen, for example omitting Hill of Banchory.

Daniel Laird confirmed that it would be difficult to significantly speed up the service, as there are no alternative routes to the A93 and the route is 54 miles in length. Whilst the carriage of Aberdeen City residents makes most of the journeys commercially viable, he confirmed that he would look at coverage of Banchory on the Aberdeen - Braemar journeys. He also advised that the company's introduction of contactless payments had reduced boarding times on all services.

- 9.9 Query as to whether there could be a reduction in the number of journeys between Ballater and Braemar late afternoon/early evening on weekdays, the savings being put towards continuation of some journeys on Sundays. This was coupled with a query as to whether the allocation of a smaller vehicle on certain journeys could reduce the cost of the service.

Daniel Laird confirmed that there may appear to be more than sufficient buses around late afternoon but there is, for example, a journey taking schoolchildren home to Braemar from Aboyne Academy, then the same vehicle operates to Aberdeen.

Regarding smaller buses, he advised that the largest cost is for labour, there being no significant difference in the cost of operating a minibus as opposed to a coach.

- 9.10 Request for the service to operate to a differential winter and summer timetable, with a reduction in journeys to/from Braemar in the winter to save costs.

Daniel Laird confirmed that this would be investigated, whilst Neil Stewart confirmed that he would not be averse to such a proposal.

- 9.11 Councillor Blackett highlighted the need for the level of service between Aboyne and Braemar to be maintained, referring to the example of schoolchildren undertaking work experience with local hospitality businesses.

10. Strachan Area

- 10.1 Request for re-instatement of journeys between Strachan and Aberdeen or a shuttle service to operate between Strachan and Banchory, connecting with services between Banchory and Aberdeen.

Neil Stewart confirmed that, whilst an average of 7 passengers per journey travelled on the withdrawn Service 204 (Strachan - Banchory - Aberdeen), an average of 4 passengers used the service to travel between Banchory and Aberdeen. He therefore confirmed that Council funding of a shuttle service could not be justified.

He advised that there are other services in the area, albeit limited, operated by Mid Deeside Trust (<http://www.mid-deeside.org.uk/bus-timetable>).

It was raised from the floor that the services operated by Mid Deeside Trust are very busy.

After the meeting, Susan Watt advised the Feughdee West Community Council residents that the Council's Deeside A2B dial-a-bus service operates in the area, albeit only weekly, and provided them with timetable and contact details.

11. A.O.B

- 11.1 Query as to what Stagecoach Bluebird's marketing budget is, and whether the company is working in partnership with Visit Scotland to promote bus services, along with tourist facilities.

Daniel Laird confirmed that the marketing budget is a significant sum with approximately 10% being allocated towards the promotion of tourist oriented services. He advised that the company works closely with Visit Scotland on a national level, and also Visit Aberdeenshire at a local level.

- 11.2 Request for facilities to be open at Union Square Bus Station when bus services commence in the early hours e.g. Megabus departure at 3.20 a.m.

Daniel Laird confirmed that Stagecoach Bluebird lease the bus station from Hammerson Ltd. and he would discuss this matter with the company. He also advised that Hammerson Ltd. has submitted plans for expansion of Union Square and Stagecoach, as a major consultee, are discussing with the company the need for improvements to the bus station facility.

- 11.3 Neil Stewart asked if everyone would have a think about the format of the Bus Forum meetings and either contact him direct or bring any ideas/comments along to the next meeting, if applicable.

There were requests from the floor for a different venue to be used when the meeting is next in Aboyne, as the volume of music downstairs was very distracting.

Neil Stewart agreed to consider a different venue as the acoustics in the Main Hall are also not conducive to proper discussions.

12. Date of Next Meeting

Councillor Blackett advised that the next meeting of the Area Bus Forum will be held in Huntly in October/November 2019.