

FORMARTINE AREA BUS FORUM

MINUTES OF MEETING ON WEDNESDAY 4th DECEMBER 2019

STAFF ROOM, ELLON COMMUNITY CAMPUS

In Attendance

Councillor I. Davidson (Aberdeenshire Council) (Chair)

Councillor P. Johnston (Aberdeenshire Council)
Councillor A. Kloppert (Aberdeenshire Council)
Carolyne Wood (Belhelvie Community Council)
Samantha Rawlins (Community Planning Officer, Aberdeenshire Council)
Trevor Mason (Ellon Community Council)
Dave Killicoat (Ellon Community Council)
Yvonne Oliver (Meldrum, Bourtie and Daviot Community Council)
Rachel Milne (North East Transport Training)
Cathy McWilliam (Bus User)
Fiona Jones (Bus User)
Mair Jones (Bus User)
Scott Bremner (Bus User)
Sheila McKay (Ellon Bus User)
Sheila Noble (Ellon Bus User)
Krista Wright (Ellon Bus User)
David Shearer (Former Bus User)
Rosemary Shearer (Former Bus User)
Anne Kenyon (Newburgh Bus User)
Catherine Blair (Newburgh Bus User)
Hugh Blair (Newburgh Bus User)
Lorraine Gosling (Newburgh Bus User)
Ray Kenyon (Newburgh Bus User)
Donna Morrison (Newburgh Bus User)
Doug Morrison (Newburgh Bus User)
Patricia Buchan (Oldmeldrum Bus User)
Roseann Fyfe-Johnston (Pitmedden Bus User)
Hilda Drummond (Potterton Bus User)
Kathryn Morrison (Prospective Bus User)
Ethel McCurrach (Turrieff Bus User)
Diane Taylor (Bains Coaches)
Chloe Gray (Commercial Analyst, Stagecoach North Scotland)
George Stephen (Inspector, Stagecoach North Scotland)
Neil Stewart (Principal Officer, Passenger Transport Unit, Aberdeenshire Council)
Susan Watt (Senior Transport Officer, Passenger Transport Unit, Aberdeenshire Council)

Apologies

Pam Young (Newmachar Community Council)
Eileen Arthur (Bus User)
Graham Findlay (Bus User)
Jim Bruce (Bus User)
Lorraine Bruce (Bus User)

1. Welcome and Introduction

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

2. Minutes of Meeting on 6th June 2019

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 has not been ruled out but advised that it would be very expensive, in particular due to the passenger usage from this location. He advised that he would provide an update at the next meeting.
- 3.2 In response to the request for a return journey between Oldmeldrum and Inverurie on weekdays to connect with rail services to/from Inverurie at peak times, he confirmed that following the award of a contract for the weekday Service 421 (Inverurie - Alford), Bains Coaches decided to register journeys at the beginning and end of the day, thus providing a journey at 0540 hours from Oldmeldrum to Alford via Inverurie at 0600 hours and a journey at 1817 hours from Alford to Oldmeldrum via Inverurie at 1856 hours.
- 3.3 Regarding Ellon Park & Ride, he confirmed that tenders for the completion of Phase 2 are being invited in the coming weeks. This follows a protracted period caused by technical issues with the specification for the works.
- 3.4 In response to an update on the bus hub at Oldmeldrum, he confirmed that full planning permission has been granted and the next stage is to negotiate the lease of the land with the landlord.
- 3.5 Regarding the request for a service via the village of Blackdog, he confirmed that discussions had been held with bus operators, but they confirmed that it was not commercially viable to operate a bus service via the village.

It transpired that the Council had limited funding available to trial a limited service via the village from 6 January until the end of March 2020, during which time it will be reviewed. It is hoped that, after this period, a limited service could be tailored to meet as many of the identified needs as possible, subject to there being funding available in financial year 2020 - 2021.

He advised that a procurement exercise had been undertaken, following which Central Coaches, as the successful operator, will operate two off peak weekday return journeys to and from Aberdeen City Centre for shopping and/or personal business, and three weekday peak journeys to/from A92 / Denmore Road to allow interchange with Stagecoach commercial bus services to/from Aberdeen and other destinations on the Buchan corridor, at no financial penalty to passengers. He advised that timetables would be distributed throughout the village in December.

Councillor Johnston expressed his thanks for this.

Chloe Gray provided the following update on behalf of Stagecoach Bluebird:

3.6 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, she confirmed that the screens are linked into the Real-Time system, with buses tracking at 98%. She added that there is a tannoy system at the Bus Station which should also be utilised, but drivers should also be informing passengers if there are any issues.

3.7 In response to the complaint regarding northbound and southbound buses, meeting at the Oldmeldrum Interchange, resulting in other vehicles being unable to pass, she confirmed that the issue should now be resolved, but advised that if buses are operating late, such situations might still arise.

It was raised from the floor that drivers sometimes park at the Interchange if the bus arrives early, creating an issue for traffic.

George Stephen confirmed that this would be investigated.

3.8 In response to Councillor Johnston's comments regarding the lengthy journey times on Service 54 (Aberdeen - Ellon), due to the routing of journeys, for example, operating via Denmore Road (Denmore Industrial Estate), where there is congestion at peak times, she confirmed that service is currently being reviewed and is taking such matters into account.

3.9 In response to the request for all journeys on Service 54 (Aberdeen – Ellon) 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, she confirmed that this is also being considered in the aforementioned review.

3.10 All the service requests raised at the last meeting by Carlyne Wood (Belhelvie Community Council), arising from the Transport Survey covering Balmedie, Belhelvie, Blackdog, Potterton and Whitecairns are being considered in the network review, and the complaints regarding driver practice/behaviour have been addressed.

3.11 In response to the repeated request for additional peak time journeys from Aberdeen, during the p.m. period, to be re-routed via Ellon town centre, she confirmed that this is also under consideration in the review.

In response to a query from Councillor Davidson as to an implementation date for the service changes arising from the review, she confirmed that there was no firm date, but would be no earlier than Spring 2020.

3.12 In response to the complaint regarding the frequent non-operation and late running of journeys on Service 290/291 (Aberdeen – Tarves / Methlick), in particular between January and March 2019, she confirmed that a meeting had been held with the Council, at which time the company had advised Councillors and officers that there would be 3 dedicated vehicles allocated to the corridor, with a replacement bus stationed in Aberdeen to cover any unforeseen circumstances.

It was raised from the floor that the 0620 hours ex Methlick – Aberdeen broke down on Tuesday 3rd December 2019.

Susan Watt confirmed that Stagecoach had made the Council aware of this and a replacement bus had been sent out, albeit resulting in late operation.

She also confirmed that the Council will continue to monitor operation of this contracted service and any breaches will be penalised accordingly.

- 3.13 In response to the query as to why buses are garaged at Fyvie, as this can result in early morning journeys not operating due to icy conditions, coupled with a claim that the heating systems on the buses often don't operate correctly, she confirmed that the stationing of buses is part of the review but there are limitations as to where buses can park overnight.

She acknowledged that it could take some time for the buses to heat up in winter, whilst confirming that the heating systems are inspected as part of the 28-day maintenance programme.

4. Stagecoach Bluebird Update

Chloe Gray provided the following update:

- 4.1 The double decker buses recently allocated to Service 35 (Aberdeen – Banff - Elgin) have improved reliability on the corridor.
- 4.2 As already mentioned, the company's main operational corridors, including the Buchan corridor, are currently being monitored following a lengthy period of operation after the completion of the A90 dual carriageway and the AWPR. Longer term, this monitoring will help the company address reliability, speed up journeys, retain local links, and consider vehicle types/allocations.
- 4.3 Christmas and New Year 'special' timetables are now available online.

George Stephen confirmed that it would be normal operation except for:

- Christmas Day and New Year's Day: No services
- 26th Dec and 2nd December: Saturday frequency on mainline services; reduced or no service on others
- 24th Dec and 31st Dec: Services will operate until around 2130/2200 hours

He stressed that this was just a quick summary so best to check online or with the company.

5. Aberdeenshire Council Update

Neil Stewart provided the following update:

- 5.1 Aberdeenshire Council supported Local Bus Services were offered for tender earlier this year and the new contracts were implemented on 19 August 2020. He advised that Bains Coaches were successful with their bid for the weekday Service 421 between Alford and Inverurie via Kemnay.
- 5.2 Tenders are scheduled to be invited for North Aberdeenshire contracts next Spring so includes Services 50 (Newburgh - Ellon), 51 (Fraserburgh/New Pitsligo - Ellon), 54 (Ellon Town Service - Aberdeen), 290/291 (Methlick - Aberdeen), 303 (Turriff - Huntly) and 308 (Aberchirder/Turriff – Inverurie). Timing of this depends on the Aberdeenshire supported services review.

6. Aberdeenshire Review of Supported Passenger Transport Services

Neil Stewart explained as follows:

The Council is undertaking what it is calling a 'clean-sheet' review of the local bus, and dial-a-bus, services that it financially supports. This is not as a result of reduced funding, but it is aimed at influencing decisions on how to prioritise spend.

A survey questionnaire has been launched on the Council's web site. It focuses on ascertaining views on how best to provide supported bus services and can be completed as individuals or on behalf of an organisation. It will run until 9th December 2019.

He urged those who hadn't completed the questionnaire yet to do so via the link on the Council's web site, as there were only a few days left.

(<https://www.aberdeenshire.gov.uk/roads-and-travel/public-transport/policies-strategies-and-contracts/>)

He advised that those who can't access the internet will soon be able to pick up printed copies in local libraries and Aberdeenshire Council offices.

He explained that the questionnaire includes questions regarding the following:

- Preferred trip purpose
- Preferences for types of services e.g. mainline to/from Aberdeen; between Aberdeenshire towns, rural areas to nearest town; town services
- Preferred times of day/day(s) of week for travel
- Fixed route or Demand Responsive
- Views on Community Transport
- Reasons for not travelling by bus

7. Public Transport Infrastructure / Information

7.1 Query as to where passenger information is displayed on the vehicle.

George Steven confirmed that depending on the type of vehicle, they are normally displayed behind the driver or on a poster on the stairs.

It was raised from the floor that there may a safety issue for passengers to read posters as they climb/descend the stairs.

7.2 Claim that the Real-Time display unit inside the bus shelter at Market Street (Ellon) is not updating, with particular reference to Friday 15th November 2019, when the screen was counting down, but the bus did not arrive and the information disappeared from the screen.

Neil Stewart confirmed that this would be investigated.

7.3 Councillor Johnston requested provision of a bus shelter on the B999, outside Pitmedden School (northbound) and on B9000 at and opposite Bronie Crescent (Pitmedden).

Neil Stewart confirmed that these requests would be investigated.

- 7.4 Councillor Johnston asked for an update on Blackdog regarding the proposed turning circle and new path.

Neil Stewart confirmed that despite various meetings and investigations, there are no confirmed plans for the footpath at present. However, the turning circle has been costed and is currently under consideration. He apologised for not being able to provide any more information.

- 7.5 Request for the provision of bus stops on the 'old' A90 at Rashierieve (southbound) and Fountainbleau (northbound and southbound).

Susan Watt confirmed that these sites have been investigated and there are safety issues at both locations. She confirmed that the request would be discussed with colleagues.

- 7.6 Request for the provision of bus stops on Hospital Road (Ellon) following the re-routing of Service 54 (Aberdeen – Ellon)

Neil Stewart confirmed that this would be considered if Stagecoach decide to continue operating via this route, though he felt that hail and ride appears to be operating successfully.

Councillor Davidson requested that the request be looked into.

- 7.7 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.

Susan Watt confirmed that this would be investigated.

- 7.8 Request for an update on the works at Ellon Park and Ride site.

Neil Stewart confirmed that tenders will be issued over the coming weeks for Phase 2, these works being delayed due to various land issues. He also confirmed that damage to the entrance and the barriers had been rectified.

- 7.9 Request for the damaged lighting in the bus shelter located at Potterton on B999 (southbound) to be rectified.

Neil Stewart confirmed that this would be actioned as soon as possible.

8. Service 35 (Aberdeen - Elgin)

- 8.1 Complaint that the vehicles are not comfortable for long journeys and that there is limited space for luggage and cycles, resulting in passengers leaving their luggage on seats

Chloe Gray confirmed that these comments would be recorded.

Neil Stewart advised that, with regard to comfort, the double deckers are not particularly popular in Macduff and Banff, due to the length of journeys involved, but they have been well received by passengers boarding further south.

- 8.2 Claim that on a.m. peak southbound journeys, there can be insufficient seats downstairs, when the bus arrives in Oldmeldrum.

George Stephen confirmed that this would be monitored.

- 8.3 Claims that the heating system can appear to be faulty, at times blowing out cold air, coupled with a complaint that the seats are too high for some passengers.

Chloe Gray confirmed that she would also relay these comments/complaints to colleagues.

- 8.4 In general, the introduction of the double new decker vehicles was welcomed from users at the meeting, with comments that they are comfortable and are more reliable in terms of arriving on time, and with fewer breakdowns. The drivers on the corridor also received compliments.

Chloe Gray welcomed this feedback.

9. Service 49 (Ellon – Inverurie)

- 9.1 Claim that there is congestion at the bus stop at Market Place on arrival of the 0930 hours ex Ellon – Inverurie (Monday to Friday), resulting in the driver allowing passengers to board and alight outwith the bus stop markings.

George Stephen confirmed that the driver should wait until the other vehicles have vacated the bus stop and then allow passengers to board and alight.

Councillor Davidson confirmed that the Police Scotland should be contacted if there are vehicles other than buses parking in the bus stop.

10. Service 50 (Ellon – Newburgh)

- 10.1 Repeated complaint regarding some drivers operating via the incorrect route within Newburgh, either operating the wrong way round, or omitting, Eider Road.

Susan Watt confirmed that discussions had previously been held with Stagecoach Bluebird, and the situation had improved, however there have been some recent issues, including those raised tonight, which have been passed onto the operator for investigation.

11. Service 54 (Aberdeen - Balmedie - Ellon and Ellon Town)

- 11.1 Request for the service to be re-routed via Ellon Community Campus, coupled with a comment that it is difficult for passengers to find out which journeys/services serve the facility.

Neil Stewart confirmed that there is insufficient spare time in the current timetable to serve Ellon Community Campus. However, there are 2 return journeys on Service 49 (Ellon – Inverurie) and 4 return journeys on Service 50 (Ellon - Newburgh) on Monday to Friday.

Susan Watt confirmed that the Ellon A2B Dial-A-Bus service also serves the facility and consideration would be given to producing a dedicated travel guide for journeys/services operating Ellon Community Campus.

- 11.2 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 to either Market Street Interchange or Ellon Park and Ride, where they can connect with a Buchan Xpress service to Aberdeen.

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

11.3 Query as to why the service was re-routed via Hospital Road (Ellon).

Neil Stewart confirmed that the service was routed via Hospital Road to reduce overall journey times, as it reduces the number of times the bus has to operate round the town centre loop and it was becoming increasingly difficult for the operator to maintain the service frequency with the same resources. He acknowledged that some people face longer journey times to/from Ellon town centre as a result, but there is the benefit of the Ellon - Aberdeen commercial frequency being maintained.

11.4 Request for the Ellon Town service and the Ellon – Aberdeen service to revert to two separate services.

Neil Stewart confirmed that the Council had agreed to Stagecoach Bluebird's request to incorporate some of the supported 'town journeys' within their Ellon - Aberdeen service as the latter was not commercially viable at the current frequency.

11.5 Councillor Johnston asked for a meeting to be held between Stagecoach Bluebird, Carolyne Wood (Belhelvie Community Council), and passengers, to discuss the issues arising from the Transport Survey undertaken in the area.

Chloe Gray confirmed that this would be arranged.

12. Service 55 (Modley - Ellon Town Centre)

12.1 Claims that some drivers operate the wrong way on Modley Avenue/Place and larger vehicles are sometimes allocated which find it difficult to negotiate the narrow streets with parked vehicles.

George Stephen confirmed that this would be investigated and asked that times and dates be provided in the future.

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

13.1 Query as to whether the level of service between Newburgh and Aberdeen is to be reduced to every 2 hours, as there were rumours to this effect.

George Stephen reaffirmed that all Stagecoach services were currently being reviewed but no firm decisions have been made at this stage.

13.2 Repeated complaint regarding insufficient seats being available for passengers boarding at King Street travelling home from work or university (St Machar Drive) to north of Aberdeen, due to passengers both boarding and alighting within Aberdeen, resulting in passengers being left.

Neil Stewart advised that Aberdeen City passengers help make the current level of service commercially viable.

George Stephen advised that making the services limited stop, would obviously restrict Aberdeenshire passengers to specific bus stops in Aberdeen, but that the comments would be recorded.

13.3 Claim that the 1620 hours ex Aberdeen - Peterhead (Service 63) operated late on Monday 25 November 2019, passengers being informed by the driver that it was due to heavy traffic, which was understandable. However, it was alleged that the driver was rude to passengers and left the stop without picking up everyone. A complaint letter was sent to Stagecoach Bluebird, but no response has been received.

Chloe Gray apologised for there being no response and confirmed that this would be investigated.

- 13.4 Claim regarding frequent late operation of the Xpress buses on the Buchan Corridor at peak times, resulting in connections being missed. It was stated that the time lost between Toll of Birness and Ellon in the mornings, and on the Ellon by-pass or on South Road (Ellon) in the early evenings, negates the time savings arising from the dualling between Balmedie and Tippetty, and AWPR.

Chloe Gray and George Stephen acknowledged this and confirmed that there needs to be a redistribution of journey times.

- 13.5 Claim that, on a regular basis, there are insufficient seats on the 1000 hours ex Ellon – Aberdeen on Saturdays on arrival at Market Street (Ellon).

Chloe Gray confirmed that this would be investigated.

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

- 14.1 Claim regarding frequent late running of the 0843 hours ex Methlick – Aberdeen (Monday to Friday), in particular on 22 November 2019, 3 December 2019 and 4 December 2019.

Susan Watt confirmed that she had received emails regarding this and had passed these onto Stagecoach Bluebird for investigation.

- 14.2 Claim regarding frequent late running of the 0953 hours ex Methlick – Aberdeen (Monday to Friday)

Chloe Gray confirmed that this would be investigated.

- 14.3 Claim that, despite an overall improvement, there has been an element of late running on the corridor over the last 3 weeks.

Chloe Gray confirmed that she was aware that the service had experienced issues over recent weeks, but with the dedicated vehicles now allocated, including a replacement bus stationed in Aberdeen, the situation should continue to improve.

15. Service 292 (Ellon – Methlick)

- 15.1 Request for the Monday to Friday journeys to be re-instated

Neil Stewart confirmed that Aberdeenshire Council withdrew the peak journeys in May 2019 as part of a comprehensive review to contain spending within the allocated Budget. Stagecoach Bluebird continued operation of the inter-peak journeys but it was clear that they were not commercially viable, so the majority of the journeys were withdrawn by the company in August 2019. He advised that the Council operates an A2B Dial-a-Bus service on Tuesdays and Thursdays, providing a link from Methlick to Ellon.

Susan Watt confirmed that there are two Service 292 journeys remaining, at 0823 hours ex Ellon – Methlick and 1752 hours ex Ellon – Fyvie (Monday to Friday), but these are essentially 'positional' journeys. She confirmed that the 2 inter-peak return journeys on a Tuesday and Thursday, operated by Ellon A2B Dial-A-Bus have been well received. She concluded by confirming that the vehicle cannot cover the area on Mondays, Wednesdays or Fridays.

- 15.2 Councillor Johnston raised a request from Tarves Community Council for the Ellon - Methlick A2B Dial-A-Bus service to be extended to serve Tarves, to replace some of the journeys withdrawn from Service 292. He asked that a direct response be provided to Tarves Community Council.

Susan Watt confirmed that there was insufficient time within the timetable to extend the service to Tarves, but would ask colleagues to respond accordingly.

16. A2B Dial-A-Bus services

- 16.1 Request for the Tuesday A2B Dial-A-Bus service between Oldmeldrum and Inverurie to operate on additional days and to serve the Inverurie Health & Care Hub for medical appointments.

Susan Watt confirmed that the vehicle is only available on a Tuesday to serve Oldmeldrum, but the request would be recorded.

- 16.2 It was raised from the floor that the Turriff A2B Dial-A-Bus service has started to settle down, with positive feedback received from the community and passengers. However, it was requested that there be additional service promotion.

Susan Watt confirmed that she would relay this request to colleagues.

- 16.3 Request for the Turriff A2B Rural Dial-A-Bus service to operate two journeys to a fixed time and route, as is currently the case with the Turriff A2B Town Dial-A-Bus service.

Susan Watt confirmed that this will be considered.

17. A.O.B

- 17.1 Query regarding Stagecoach Bluebird's complaints procedures, claiming that responses are rarely received within the stipulated timescales.

Chloe Gray confirmed that all complaints are recorded and a response sent within 7 days. She asked that specific details of non-conformation with these timescales be provided.

- 17.2 Request for additional 'fixed route' services to operate via the Inverurie Health & Care Hub, for those attending medical appointments, for example, the commercial Service 240 (Oldmeldrum – Inverurie – Kemnay) operated by Bains Coaches.

Susan Watt confirmed that Bain Coaches had been asked previously, but due to insufficient spare time within their current timetable, they were unable to re-route the service.

Following the meeting this was reaffirmed by Bain Coaches.

18. Date of Next Meeting

Councillor Davidson confirmed that the next meeting of the Forum is planned to take place in Oldmeldrum in late Spring 2020. Full details will be advised in due course.