

KINCARDINE AND MEARNS AREA BUS FORUM

MINUTES OF MEETING ON THURSDAY 31st OCTOBER 2019

LIBRARY, MACKIE ACADEMY, STONEHAVEN

In Attendance

Councillor W. Agnew (Aberdeenshire Council) (Chair)

Councillor I. Mollison (Aberdeenshire Council)

Paul Melling (Chair, Portlethen and District Community Council)

Ken Watson (Portlethen)

George Ewing (Newtonhill, Muchalls and Cammachmore Community Council)

Chris Greene (Benholm and Johnshaven Community Council)

John Leavey (Benholm and Johnshaven Community Council)

Kate Leavey (Benholm and Johnshaven Community Council)

Eileen Williamson (Portlethen Bus User)

Sheena Adam (Stonehaven Bus User)

May Riddell (Bus User)

Fiona Hill (Bus User)

Ian Bennett (Bus User)

Barbara Lewis (Bus User)

Simon King (Allocation Manager, Stagecoach East Scotland)

Daniel Laird (Commercial Director, Stagecoach North Scotland)

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

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

Apologies

Councillor S. Dickinson (Aberdeenshire Council)

Peter Flockhart (Newtonhill Bus User)

Michael Morgan (Newtonhill, Muchalls & Cammachmore Community Council)

Morag Andrew (Newtonhill Bus User)

1. Welcome and Introduction

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

2. Minutes of Meeting on 25th April 2019

The minutes were approved

3. Matters Arising from the Minutes

Neil Stewart provided the following update on behalf of Aberdeenshire Council:

- 3.1 Regarding the request for a bus shelter on Kirkton Road (Stonehaven) opposite the entrance to Kincardine Community Hospital, he confirmed the matter is still ongoing with the developer.

- 3.2 Regarding the possibility of lowering the road below the railway bridge on Slug Road, Stonehaven, he advised that a report was considered by Kincardine and Mearns Area Committee recently, when Councillors were able to consider the pros and cons of lowering the road. It was decided that the works would not go ahead due to the costs outweighing passenger benefits, particularly in view of the unknown additional costs associated with public utilities and the fact that Network Rail own the bridge.
- 3.3 In response to the requests for the 'bum bars' to be replaced by seats, and higher quality bus shelter facilities in general, at Barclay Street Interchange (Stonehaven), he confirmed that passenger transport infrastructure will be reviewed after forthcoming Stagecoach timetable changes have bedded in, as there may be a need to revise bus routings and stopping places.
- 3.4 In response to the query as to why Aberdeenshire Council has not adopted Chapelton Park and Choose, he confirmed that the developers are keen to retain ownership of the site, however the Council is trying to engage with them regarding lighting, real time information and the passenger facilities in general.
- 3.5 In response to the request for 'pearl bars' to be re-instated on timetable information displays as these give an indication of where the bus operates and is particularly helpful for new users and tourists, he confirmed that they are to be reinstated and will be rolled out in the coming months.

Daniel Laird provided the following update on behalf of Stagecoach North Scotland:

- 3.6 In response to the request for Service 4A/4C (Stonehaven Town Service) timings to be amended to improve connections on Barclay Street, he confirmed that this is currently being considered.
- 3.7 In response to Councillor Dickinson's correspondence regarding congestion problems on Barclay Street (Stonehaven), he confirmed that this will be considered in the forthcoming review but there is an obvious need for connectivity between various bus services.
- 3.8 In response to the request for Service 4A/4C to serve Stonehaven Community Hospital, he confirmed that this is also being considered, subject to a risk assessment, but he advised that the service is currently operating within a very tight timetable and requests have also been received to serve the Ury Estate development.
- 3.9 In response to the complaints regarding a lack of stances, and restricted queueing areas, at Union Square he confirmed that, as a company, they have implemented minor improvements such as employing reversing assistance to improve safety, revised queueing arrangements for those boarding long distance services, and an agreement with Hammerson Ltd for Union Square to open at 5 a.m. to allow passengers to wait inside the facility.

He added that one of the conditions which must be fulfilled to allow Hammerson Ltd to extend Union Square is to make improvements to the bus station facility e.g. new covered waiting room, additional stances etc.

- 3.10 Regarding the display screens situated within Union Square at the entrance to the Bus Station, he confirmed that those situated on the pillar next to the small waiting area are not functioning and will be removed.

He advised that the screens at the stances display region-wide Real Time passenger information and are operated by Aberdeenshire Council. The 'Totem' within Union Square is owned by Nestrans, displaying scheduled departure times.

- 3.11 There is no intention to omit Lily Loch Road, Stonehaven, from their services.
- 3.12 It is unlikely that the 0928 hours ex Forrest Park (Saturday) can be extended to serve Farrochie Road, in view of the decision regarding the Slug Road railway bridge as this would require an additional vehicle.
- 3.13 In response to the request for the 2150 hours ex Aberdeen - Portlethen to be retarded to depart at 2220 hours to allow those attending HM Theatre in Aberdeen to travel home, he confirmed that this will be considered in the forthcoming service review.
- 3.14 He confirmed that, rather than the company issue tourist tickets, it offers group tickets which are currently being promoted at half price. He also referred to the Bluebird explorer, which covers travel in Aberdeen City, Aberdeenshire and Moray from Montrose to Inverness.

4. Stagecoach Bluebird: Update

Daniel Laird provided the following update on behalf of Stagecoach North Scotland, whilst Simon King provided an update on behalf of Stagecoach East Scotland.

Daniel Laird confirmed the following:

- 4.1 Aberdeenshire Council's review of supported Local Bus services earlier this year, coupled with the tendering of such services in south Aberdeenshire, have had a knock-on impact on the commercial network resulting, on occasions, in the withdrawal of journeys.
- 4.2 Service 747 (Peterhead / Ellon - Airport - Stonehaven - Montrose)

The service was introduced on 20 January 2019 following public consultation and the opening of the AWPR, operating between Peterhead/Ellon and Stonehaven via A90, then on to Montrose via A92. Initially it operated on an approximate hourly basis and it was hoped that after a strong publicity campaign, that the corridor would see on-going growth, but this has not materialised. This resulted in a reduction in the level of service from 19 August 2019 to try to maintain commercial viability, resulting in, for example, a reduced level of service between Stonehaven and Montrose.

He also confirmed that Stagecoach have worked closely with Aberdeen Airport and the loss of the Gatwick to Aberdeen service had been disappointing.

In response to a complaint from the floor regarding the reductions on the Stonehaven - Montrose section, Neil Stewart explained that the Council withdrew financial support for the evening service with effect from 15 April 2019 following the aforementioned supported Local Bus service review, but Stagecoach Bluebird continued its operation without subsidy until 19 August 2019.

He also explained that the daytime service between Stonehaven and Montrose via the coastal villages is not commercially viable, but Stagecoach Bluebird are able to operate to the current frequency due to the utilisation of resources which are available between 'school times'.

4.3 Service 757 (Chapelton – Portlethen - Airport)

The service was also introduced on 20 January 2019, following consultation with the public and market research. Unfortunately, passenger usage was extremely low, with numerous journeys frequently operating with up to 1 passenger. The service level was therefore reduced in March 2019 but the situation did not improve, resulting in the service being discontinued with effect from 19 August 2019.

4.4 All the company's main operational corridors, including Aberdeen – Stonehaven, are currently being monitored and reviewed, the aim being to address reliability, speed up journeys, retain local links, and consider vehicle types/allocations. He confirmed that the proposals will be the subject of public consultation.

Simon King confirmed the following:

4.5 Service X7 (Aberdeen - Stonehaven - Dundee) continues to operate reliably with high passenger usage. There is also a need to reduce running times due to revised traffic levels on some routes following the completion of the AWPR. He confirmed that the coaches, which are generally popular, have received some criticism regarding accessibility, but these cannot be replaced in the short to medium term as they are only 5 years old, but all comments will be taken into account when a decision is taken on vehicle replacement.

5. **Aberdeenshire Council: Update**

Neil Stewart provided the following update:

Council supported local bus services were offered for competitive tender earlier in spring this year and the new contracts were implemented on 19 August 2019, with the main changes in the area being Service 26 (Luthermuir/Laurencekirk - Stonehaven) being taken over by Stagecoach Bluebird (previously M W Nicoll); and both Services 29 (Fettercairn - Laurencekirk) & Service 104 (Auchenblae – Stonehaven) being taken over by M W Nicoll (previously Central Taxis and Stagecoach Bluebird respectively).

However, unfortunately M W Nicoll ceased trading earlier this month and the Council had to undertake competitive tendering on a short term basis, resulting in Smith & Sons Coaches taking over operation of Services 29 and 104. Service 9 (Laurencekirk - Montrose), most of which was operated by M W Nicoll on behalf of Aberdeenshire Council, was taken over by Smith & Sons on weekdays and Stagecoach East Scotland on Saturdays, following the above procurement process.

He referred to the journeys, which M W Nicoll had operated on a commercial basis and confirmed that only those which carried significant numbers of Aberdeenshire residents were continued with financial support from Aberdeenshire Council.

In conclusion, he explained that there were some journeys on Services 9 and 29 which took Angus based schoolchildren to/from Mearns Academy on a fare paying basis. Whilst usage by Aberdeenshire residents was minimal, this authority will continue its financial support for these journeys until the end of the current term, to allow parents and carers sufficient time to organise alternative transport. As yet, Angus Council have decided not to provide financial support for either of these cross boundary services.

6. Aberdeenshire Review of Supported Passenger Transport Services

Neil Stewart confirmed the following:

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.

[\(https://www.aberdeenshire.gov.uk/roads-and-travel/public-transport/policies-strategies-and-contracts/\)](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

It was raised from the floor as to whether mobile libraries would be included into the distribution list.

Neil Stewart confirmed that these should be included but he would raise this matter with his contact at Library and Information services.

7. Public Transport Infrastructure / Information

- 7.1 Request for messages to be displayed on the Real Time screens to inform passengers of the late running or non-running of a journey.

Daniel Laird confirmed that Stagecoach is working with Aberdeenshire Council to improve the system, including the possibility of displaying messages. He also confirmed that 98.6% of the company's journeys are currently tracked on the system.

- 7.2 Query as to what measures can be undertaken to improve traffic flow on Barclay Street (Stonehaven), highlighting the volume of buses, goods vehicles loading/unloading, and general parking in the area.

Simon King advised that Stagecoach East Scotland have been monitoring the situation in the Barclay Street/Cameron Street area and have concerns regarding the safety of the interchange location for both drivers and passengers in view of the above issues. He added that the company may need to seek an alternative bus stop location within the town.

There was discussion regarding other options for local bus service interchange with Market Square, and the reinstatement of Cameron Street for northbound buses, being suggested.

Neil Stewart reaffirmed that the forthcoming Stagecoach revisions will be monitored for a specific period (likely 3 months) following which it may be necessary to arrange a meeting will between the Council and the operators.

8. Services X6/X7/7/7A/7B (Aberdeen - Portlethen - Stonehaven)

- 8.1 Query as to why coaches are allocated to Services 7/7B on Sundays.

Daniel Laird confirmed that if there are breakdowns or other emergency situations, alternative vehicles are allocated to ensure that the journey operates but apologised for this happening on Sundays and agreed to investigate.

- 8.2 Request for Service 7B, which currently takes around 75 minutes to complete a journey, to be speeded up by omitting some of the places currently served, as this could encourage more passengers to use the service.

Daniel Laird acknowledged this and that it is being considered in the forthcoming review.

- 8.3 Complaint that Services 747 and X7 just miss each other, thus denying the opportunity for interchange.

Daniel Laird and Simon King confirmed that this will be looked at, bearing in mind demand for connections with other services.

- 8.4 Claim that the 1150 hours ex Aberdeen – Stonehaven (Service 7B) did not extend from Barclay Street to Spurryhillock on Sunday 27 October 2019.

Daniel Laird confirmed that this would be investigated.

9. Services 4A/4C (Stonehaven Town Service)

Repeated request to address the gap in service on Saturday mornings

Whilst Neil Stewart had confirmed at the previous meeting that no Council funds are available for this, Daniel Laird confirmed that it will be considered in the forthcoming review.

10. Service 747 (Peterhead/Ellon - Airport - Stonehaven - Montrose)

- 10.1 Claims regarding frequent late running, non-operation of journeys, and drivers omitting Gourdon and/or Johnshaven if the bus is operating late, resulting in passengers being left stranded. It was, however, agreed that service reliability, if not frequency, has improved since the last service revision on 19 August 2019.

Daniel Laird confirmed that unless there is an emergency situation, there is no excuse for drivers not adhering to the registered route, even if the bus is operating late, and he asked that times and dates be provided at the time of each incident. He advised that, initially, it had been difficult to predict journey running times due to the length of route and the effects of the AWPR but acknowledged the comment regarding reliability improvements since 19 August.

Neil Stewart advised that the August to October period had also been difficult for traffic affected by the lane closures at Cowie Bridge on the A90.

- 10.2 Claim that a small minibus ("Sprinter") is often allocated to the corridor and it has limited seating capacity and very narrow aisles, resulting in passengers having to stand or struggle to get to the seating area. It was further claimed that this is impacting on passengers with walking difficulties and parents/carers with pushchairs and the driver has had to help passengers board and alight.

Daniel Laird apologised for this and confirmed that low floor vehicles should normally be allocated to the corridor. He confirmed that the "Sprinter" was normally allocated to journeys with lower usage and it will soon be removed from the corridor.

- 10.3 Request for Service 747 to be re-routed to additionally serve Portlethen and Newtonhill, in view of the withdrawal of Service 757.

Daniel Laird confirmed that the additional mileage involved would add too much time and therefore impact on the company's resources and would also deter current passengers from using the service. (see also Item 11.1)

- 10.4 Request for additional journeys in the afternoons to serve Gourdon and Johnshaven.

Daniel Laird confirmed that, whilst this would be considered in a forthcoming review, it is unlikely to be possible in view of the resource/financial implications.

- 10.5 Query as to why the service was re-routed to serve Balmedie in August 2019.

Daniel Laird confirmed that the additional mileage is negligible (<0.5 mile) so there was sufficient time to serve the town to try and stimulate passenger usage.

10.6 Query as to the Council funding on the corridor.

Neil Stewart confirmed that the Council funds an approximate 2 hourly weekday service between Peterhead/Ellon and Aberdeen Airport/Dyce Industrial Estate (approx. £140k/annum) and a limited number of journeys between Stonehaven and Montrose via Gourdon and Johnshaven (1 pm peak return journey Monday to Friday and 3 daytime return journeys on Saturdays) (approx. £23k/annum).

He added that the Council welcomed the initiative by Stagecoach to introduce the regular through service between north and south Aberdeenshire via the airport and AWPR and whilst the Council contributes funding it is likely to be less than 20% of the cost of the entire service.

10.7 Drivers on the service received praise from the floor for doing a great job, particularly in regard to negotiating the narrow streets of Gourdon and Johnshaven.

11.1 Service 757 (Chapelton - Newtonhill - Portlethen - Airport)

11.1 Request for an explanation as to why an additional a.m. journey between Newtonhill and Aberdeen Airport via Portlethen and Kingswells, as recorded in the minutes of the previous meeting, had not been considered.

Daniel Laird confirmed that this had been considered but would have required additional resources.

Following further discussions, Daniel Laird agreed to look at the possibility of one service 747 journey diverting via Newtonhill and Portlethen to arrive at Kingswells Park & Ride between 0730 hours and 0830 hours.

11.2 Query as to why the service was withdrawn after operating for less than 8 months, with the claim that David Liston had confirmed that it would operate for at least 12 months to allow a proper review.

Daniel Laird confirmed that he was unaware of this pledge, but the service had been monitored over the 8 week period and heavily publicised, but with no sign of passenger growth and increasing losses being borne by the company, it could not be sustained.

12. Other Matters

12.1 Query as to whether more Hydrogen buses could be introduced into the fleet.

Daniel Laird confirmed that Stagecoach Bluebird originally allocated a number of these vehicles to Service X17 (Aberdeen - Westhill) due to its proximity to the City, but following conclusion of the project, which was supported by European funding, the buses are currently parked. He advised that there were found to be mechanical and reliability issues when they were first introduced and at a cost of 1 million euros per vehicle, they are very expensive. He also advised that, whilst there have been mixed reviews of the vehicles, further investment may bring improved results, and that First Bus Aberdeen are introducing more into their fleet.

- 12.2 Claim regarding speeding by drivers of the long distance services (Citylink and Megabus) within built up areas, coupled with a query as to whether driving standards are monitored.

Daniel Laird advised that the vehicles are limited to 62 mph but added that allegations of speeding must be reported to Police Scotland.

Regarding driving practices, he advised that Stagecoach Bluebird operate the “Green Road” system <https://greenroad.com/uk/>, which monitors driving standards and this encourages drivers to operate more effectively and economically. Good practices can be rewarded with a company bonus and, conversely, a driver may be required to take a refresher course if they are found to be short of the required standard.

- 12.3 Query as to whether there are any plans to withdraw A2B services in the area, particularly those serving Portlethen.

Neil Stewart confirmed that there are no plans to withdraw A2B dial-a-bus services but they are included in the aforementioned ‘clean sheet review’.

- 12.4 Query as to why Service 727 (Union Square Bus Station – Aberdeen Airport) is not limited stop.

Daniel Laird confirmed that the service originally operated as limited stop, but this was relaxed due to the volume of passengers wishing to travel between other points on the route and, in turn, this allowed an increased frequency. He advised that there are other opportunities with the opening of P& J Live.

- 12.5 Query as how to contact Stagecoach Bluebird with a complaint, claiming that calls are often not answered, or no call back is received when a message is left. Furthermore, it was claimed that the automated system sometimes does not allow for messages to be left.

Daniel Laird apologised and confirmed that the system will be revisited. He added that the phone line either goes to someone in the Travel Shop or inside the main office and there should be a means of leaving a message if people can’t get through to speak to a member of staff.

- 12.6 Query as to whether drivers report back on safety issues while operating a service.

Daniel Laird confirmed that it is an essential part of the driver training course to report any such issues to the depot, either after their morning vehicle check or if an issue is found later in the day.

- 12.7 Query as to whether concession card holders could pay a small payment towards travel under the Scheme.

Neil Stewart confirmed that the National Entitlement Card Scheme is administered by the Scottish Government, so suggestions/comments would need to be directed to them. <https://www.transport.gov.scot/concessionary-travel>

Susan Watt confirmed that the Scottish Government undertook public consultation over a year ago in its consideration of whether to revise the Scheme, but the decision was taken to preserve the current arrangements.

- 12.8 Query as to whether there is any funding available to operators from the public sector towards public transport initiatives aimed at tackling climate change.

Daniel Laird confirmed that the Scotland (Transport) Bill <https://www.transport.gov.scot/our-approach/transport-scotland-bill/>, which was passed on 10 October 2019, is designed to make the transport network cleaner, smarter and more accessible than ever before. He advised the Bill has provision for new Bus Service Improvement Partnerships and Local Franchising, as well as extended powers for local transport authorities to provide their own bus services to cater for social needs.

He also advised that the Scottish Government has confirmed £500 million to support bus service infrastructure, to improve the reliability of bus services.

<https://transportknowledgehub.org.uk/news/scottish-government-announces-500m-bus-infrastructure-investment/>

(All of the above will be discussed at future meetings as and when any announcements are made in regards to North East Scotland)

- 12.9 There was reference from the floor to a letter sent by Michael Morgan, Chairman of Newtonhill, Muchalls and Cammachmore Community Council, to Stagecoach Bluebird regarding suggested improvements to the bus services that serve the Newtonhill area.

Daniel Laird confirmed that he was aware of the letter and that a response will be sent soon.

13. Date of Next Meeting

Councillor Agnew advised that the next meeting of the Area Bus Forum will be held in Stonehaven in Spring 2020, the date being dependent upon the timing of the consultation period on the outcome of the Council's aforementioned review.