

GARIOCH AREA BUS FORUM

MINUTES OF MEETING ON WEDNESDAY 11TH SEPTEMBER 2013

FRIENDSHIP ROOM, VILLAGE HALL, KEMNAY

In Attendance

Councillor S. Lonchay (Aberdeenshire Council) (Chair)

Councillor I Walker (Aberdeenshire Council)
Chris Hunneyball (Kemnay Community Council & Bus User)
Sarah Robinson (Bennachie Community Council)
Mark Foster (Bennachie Community Council)
Margaret Watson (Bennachie Community Council)
Shelia Gray (Kintore Community Council)
Ann Marston (Kintore Community Council)
Richard Taylor (Fintray & Kinellar Community Council)
Pamela Young (Newmachar Community Council)
Fiona Duncan (Newmachar Community Council)
Rosemary Murray (Westhill and Elrick Community Council)
Shonagh Donachie (Kemnay Resident & Bus User)
Julie Barker (Westhill Resident & Bus User)
Heather Stoddart (Kemnay Resident & Bus User)
James MacKay (Bus User)
Doreen Abel (Kemnay Resident & Bus User)
Richard Lamplugh (Bus User)
Brian Bullen (Observer)
Doug Bain (Bains Coaches)
Steve Walker (Managing Director, Stagecoach North Scotland)
Bob Hall (Commercial Officer, Stagecoach Bluebird)
Neil Stewart (Principal Officer, Public Transport Unit, Aberdeenshire Council)
Susan Watt (Senior Transport Officer, Public Transport Unit, Aberdeenshire Council)

Apologies

Councillor R McKail (Aberdeenshire Council)
Elizabeth Riley (Alford Resident & Bus User)
Douglas Riley (Alford Resident & Bus User)

1. Welcome and Introduction

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

2. Minutes of Meeting on 20th March 2013

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 the provision of bus stops on Hallforest Road, Kintore, he confirmed that the works have been partially progressed, with 3 bus shelters and 2 bus stops currently installed, but a further 3 shelters still to be put in place. The civil works are still outstanding, completion of which will result in the installation of raised kerbs and footpaths extended to the roadside.
- 3.2 Regarding the request for the provision of bus stop at Midmill (outside Sandy Thain Car Sales), he apologised and confirmed that an assessment has still to be undertaken.
- 3.3 Regarding the introduction of a Real Time Passenger Information System, which will display “real” departure times from key interchange points throughout Aberdeenshire, he confirmed that implementation of the system, which will take 4 months, will commence in September/October 2013. The mainline Buchan corridor will be operational first and the remainder of services will become live in summer 2014.
- 3.4 In response to the request for the sides to be re-instated on the new bus shelter at High Street, Kemnay, he confirmed that the shelter has historically been damaged by vehicles, therefore a facility with reduced width has been installed to minimise the potential for further collisions.

Steve Walker provided the following update on behalf of Stagecoach Bluebird:

- 3.5 Service 422 (Insch - Alford), which was re-instated on 15 April 2013, will continue operating during the winter months on an experimental basis.
- 3.6 In response to the repeated claim regarding frequent non-operation of the 0537 hours ex Alford – Aberdeen (0601 hours ex Kemnay) (Monday to Friday), with particular reference to Wednesday 13 March 2013, he confirmed that the vehicle had broken down and apologised for this.
- 3.7 In response to the repeated claims regarding frequent non-operation of the 0717 hours (0653 hours ex Alford) (Monday to Friday) and 0731 hours (0707 hours ex Alford) (Saturday) ex Kemnay - Aberdeen, he also apologised and acknowledged that the company had provided a very poor service to passengers, and the aim of the company, now under new management, is to make considerable improvements in service delivery.
- 3.8 In response to the repeated claim regarding frequent non-operation of the 1001 hours ex Kemnay - Aberdeen (Monday to Saturday), with particular reference to Tuesday 19th March 2013, he again confirmed a breakdown and re-iterated the need to address reliability.

- 3.9 In response to the claims that several journeys were not operated, or only partially operated, on Saturday 2 March 2013, as follows:
- 1101 hrs ex Kemnay - Aberdeen: did not operate
 - 1201 hrs ex Kemnay - Aberdeen: did not operate
 - 1115 hrs ex Aberdeen - Kemnay: broke down
 - 1215 hrs ex Aberdeen - Kemnay: picked up 1115 hrs passengers & broke down
- Steve Walker confirmed all the claims to be true and apologised to all those affected.
- 3.10 In response to the request for an additional journey to bridge the gap in departures from Kemnay to Aberdeen between 0717 hours and 0900 hours (Monday to Friday), he confirmed that this would be considered in the next service review, though it would be very costly for the company to provide the necessary resources at this time of day.
- 3.11 The request for the 1715 hours ex Aberdeen – Kemnay to be retarded to depart at 1725 hours would also be considered in the next service review.
- 3.12 In response to the request for the morning peak journeys to be covered by Stagecoach Bluebird’s resources in the Aberdeen area, rather than Inch, due to reliability problems associated with buses being unable to reach Alford from Inch depot during severe weather conditions, he confirmed that this would also be under consideration.
- 3.13 In response to the query as to why Service 35 serves Aberdeen Royal Infirmary (ARI), as opposed to Service 35A, whilst it is Service 37A (Aberdeen - Inverurie), rather than Service 37, which operates via ARI, he confirmed that this matter would likely be addressed at the next service review.
- 3.14 Regarding the query as to where Service 37/37A (Aberdeen – Inverurie) picks up on Union Street (Aberdeen), he confirmed that the service stops on both sides of Union Street, at and opposite St Nicholas Kirk.
- 3.15 In response to the claim regarding the deterioration in the reliability of Service 37/37A, since it was revised on 29 October 2012, he again apologised and confirmed that monitoring is ongoing, with a view to addressing such problems in April 2014.
- 3.16 In response to the repeated claim regarding frequent non-operation and late running of the 0658 hours ex Kemnay - Inverurie (Monday to Friday) with particular reference to Tuesday 19th March 2013, when the bus arrived in Kemnay 45 minutes late, he confirmed that the journey had experienced delays on the specified date, due to the icy road conditions, and that the daily operation of the journey would be monitored in view of the general complaint.
- 3.17 In response to the claim that the 1014 hours ex Alford - Kemnay - Inverurie did not operate on Tuesday 19th March 2013, he confirmed that it did not operate due to the worsening weather on that date (3.16 also refers).

4. Stagecoach Bluebird Update

Steve Walker provided the following update:

- 4.1 He confirmed that Stagecoach Bluebird has merged with Stagecoach Highland to become Stagecoach North Scotland and this has resulted in a new management structure, with himself as Managing Director and Stephanie Barber as Operations Director.

He apologised for the poor standard/quality of service delivered to customers earlier in 2013 and promised to make every effort to restore their confidence. He explained that the improvements may take a little time to be fully implemented but felt that passengers should already have seen some positive developments.

He advised the following plans, whilst confirming that the whole process could take 6 to 8 months to complete:

- Restore reliability - improvements already underway but lots to do
- Operations Manager - to stimulate employment to address staff shortage – in particular at Inch depot.
- Old articulated vehicles to be replaced by more reliable low floor double deckers at Inch depot.
- Inch Depot to be manned from 0500 hours to 1900 hours on weekdays
- Work more closely with local authorities and community councils
- Increased and more advance public consultation on service proposals
- Allow revised services to bed in over time rather than constantly make changes

Councillor Lonchay expressed her appreciation for the above positive developments.

Aberdeenshire Council Update

Neil Stewart provided the following update:

- 4.1 Service 493 (Ellon – Inverurie)

This Aberdeenshire Council contracted service was re-routed on the 19 August 2013, to serve the Uryside housing development on the outskirts of Inverurie (B9170)

- 4.2 Service 35/35A (Aberdeen – Elgin – Inverness)

In response to Stagecoach Bluebird's decision to truncate the 0605 hours ex Aberdeen – Inverness (Mon-Fri) to commence in Oldmeldrum, the Council undertook an analysis of passenger information for the entire journey, which indicates that, of the 9 passengers per day, on average, who board or alight on the withdrawn section, 6 travel wholly within the City of Aberdeen, therefore no action has been taken.

- 4.3 Following an increase in demand on the Westhill A2B dial-a-bus service, principally due to the volume of requests for transport to the medical centre, tenders have been invited from bus operators for the following options:
- i) A second vehicle to cover the town
 - ii) A Wednesday and Friday A2B dial-a-bus service to cater for demand from residents in the outlying areas

It is likely that only one of the above options will be awarded, if at all, due to financial constraints but any new contract is likely to start at the end of January 2014.

4.4 Passenger Transport Strategy and Passenger Transport Policy

Aberdeenshire Council is currently reviewing its Passenger Transport Strategy and Passenger Transport Policies, with a consultation document to be made available on the Council's website over the coming weeks, where members of the public will have an opportunity to comment. He confirmed that everyone on the Area Bus Forum circulation list will be advised accordingly.

5. **Bus Service Requests/Development**

Neil Stewart referred to the papers circulated, detailing pending and fulfilled service requests in the Garioch Area, and provided the following update:

- 5.1 The request for an additional journey to bridge the gap between 0717 hours and 0900 hours ex Kemnay to Aberdeen (Monday to Friday) on Service X20/220 (Aberdeen – Kemnay - Alford), is not currently considered by Stagecoach Bluebird to be commercially viable, but the company will look at it in their review of services.
- 5.2 The request for the 1715 hours ex Aberdeen - Kemnay to be retarded to depart at 1725 hours on Service X20/220, will be considered by Stagecoach Bluebird in their review, which will need to ascertain the views of existing passengers.
- 5.3 The request for the 2205 hours and 2300 hours ex Inverurie - Kemnay (Fridays & Saturdays) to operate Monday to Saturday on Service 421 (Alford – Inverurie) is currently considered as low priority by the Council, as the journey was previously withdrawn between Monday and Thursday due to extremely limited passenger demand. It will be given due consideration when the supported network is reviewed prior to tendering in 2015.
- 5.4 The request from Newmachar residents for re-introduction of a service to Dyce (Asda) was fulfilled on 14 April 2013 by Stagecoach Bluebird, with the introduction of their commercial Service 235 (Oldmeldrum – Newmachar – Dyce).
- 5.5 In response to requests from Local Councillors and Kingseat residents, Stagecoach Bluebird will re-route the above service to operate via Kingseat on an experimental basis, with effect from 2 December 2013.

6. Public Transport Infrastructure / Information

- 6.1 Request for the provision of a bus shelter at Bogbeth Park, Kemnay (across from the bowling club), for travel to Aberdeen.

Neil Stewart confirmed that this would be investigated.

- 6.2 Claim that vans parked at the bus stop on School Road at East Park Road (Kintore) result in buses not being able to access the stop and sometimes this results in people not being picked up there.

Neil Stewart confirmed that this would be investigated and Steve Walker confirmed that the drivers will be informed of this matter, so they can look out for passengers, pending any action to resolve the parking issue.

- 6.3 Query regarding the naming of bus stops in Westhill, with particular reference to two stops on Westhill Drive being named Westhill Road.

Neil Stewart confirmed that this would be investigated.

- 6.4 Request for Stagecoach Bluebird to inform passengers of the forthcoming road works in Westhill, so passengers can plan ahead for services potentially operating late.

Steve Walker confirmed that buses will be allowed through the road works during the peak periods and notices will be posted on vehicles informing passengers.

7. Service 10 (Aberdeen – Huntly – Elgin/Inverness)

- 7.1 Councillor Lonchay raised the matter of insufficient seating capacity provided on p.m. peak journeys from Aberdeen, with few seats remaining on departure from Union Square due to people making journeys within Aberdeen, resulting in Aberdeenshire passengers not being able to board at various stops leading out of the City, in particular at Aberdeen Royal Infirmary.

Steve Walker confirmed that monitoring would be undertaken and capacity issues will be addressed in the forthcoming service review.

- 7.2 Claim that a driver had not take action to close a toilet door on an Aberdeen – Inverness journey, resulting in a noisy journey for passengers.

Steve Walker confirmed that if complaints are accompanied by dates and times the drivers can be identified and interviewed accordingly.

- 7.3 Stagecoach Bluebird received a compliment from “the floor” regarding the quality of service provided to passengers on this route in general.

- 7.4 Request for the 2225 hours ex Aberdeen – Inverness (Service 10B) (Monday to Friday) to operate via Inch, instead the existing 2125 hours departure.

Steve Walker confirmed that this would be considered in consultation with Aberdeenshire Council.

7.5 Query as to whether passengers are permitted to stand on the coaches.

Steve Walker advised that the new coaches are not certified to carry any standees.

8. Service X20/220 (Aberdeen - Kemnay/Alford)

8.1 Claim that the running time of the 1715 hours ex Aberdeen - Kemnay is too generous, resulting in the bus having to wait at various stops in order to adhere to the timetable.

Steve Walker confirmed that the running times will be re-assessed as part of the service review, whilst highlighting the difficulty of predicting these, due to variable traffic congestion in City of Aberdeen. He also explained that the company has to be careful not to underestimate running times, as they could be summoned to a public enquiry by the Traffic Commissioner if more than 5% journeys operate more than a minute early or more than 5 minutes late.

He requested Aberdeenshire Councillors to lobby their Aberdeen City Council counterparts and other relevant organisations with regard to taking the necessary action required to address congestion and improve traffic management, including further bus priority measures, to enable bus companies to improve service reliability within Aberdeen City. He mentioned the fact that it is quite common for buses to take up to 10 minutes simply to exit Union Square bus station.

He also advised that more and more vehicles and drivers are required each year, simply to maintain existing services and if these resources can be freed up, they can be allocated to areas where improvements could be implemented.

8.2 Request for journeys to operate as a circular service (Kemnay – Kintore – Inverurie – Kemnay) to allow passengers to make connections with other services, for example to/from Aberdeen Royal Infirmary.

Steve Walker confirmed that there is a proposal for a Park & Ride site on the A96, near the airport, and this will allow such connections in the future.

9. Service 35/35A (Aberdeen – Banff – Elgin/Inverness)

9.1 Query as to why the 1450 hours ex Dyce - Aberdeen commences in Dyce and not further north.

Steve Walker advised that the bus will have completed another service/contract in that area and it is better to register a journey back to Union Square for the benefit of fare-paying passengers, than run “off service”.

9.2 Repeated request for the service to revert to operation via Riverview Drive in Dyce.

Steve Walker confirmed that this would be considered in the review.

10. Service 37/37A (Aberdeen – Inverurie)

- 10.1 Claim that some buses are operating with faulty heating systems, in particular over the summer months, when the heating was still on, despite hot temperatures outside.

Steve Walker confirmed that the company is aware of this issue and is currently testing buses prior to the winter months to ensure that the heating systems are operating correctly, and further tests will be carried out before the summer months to ensure that temperatures can be lowered or the heating switched off entirely.

- 10.2 Complaint that the route of Service 37/37A within Aberdeen City centre is too long and “tortuous” for longer distance passengers.

Bob Hall advised that the services need to fulfil passenger demand for various City centre destinations (e.g. Robert Gordon’s College), including Union Street, and the alternative route to Union Square via Denburn Road does not serve the City centre.

11. Service 306 (Inverurie – Huntly)

- 11.1 Councillor Lonchay requested that consideration be given to re-timing the service to connect with more Service 10 (Aberdeen – Inverurie – Elgin/Inverness) journeys, in particular for the benefit of people wishing to travel to/from Aberdeen Royal Infirmary.

Neil Stewart confirmed that, whilst this would be investigated, many of the journey timings are dictated by the need to carry schoolchildren to/from The Gordon Schools (Huntly) and the service provides links to both Huntly and Inverurie for various purposes.

Steve Walker confirmed that Service 10, along with other mainline services, was currently being reviewed, with revisions scheduled for early April 2014, following completion of a consultation period, so it would be advisable to implement changes to Service 306, where possible, at the same time.

Councillor Lonchay requested that consideration be given to the introduction of a shuttle bus service (perhaps demand responsive transport) in the Inch area, providing connections with Service 10 to either Aberdeen or Inverness.

Neil Stewart confirmed that this would be considered in the next Council review of supported services. He also advising that the authority will be exploring the possibility of creating “mini-interchange hubs” on mainline corridors and such a facility on the A96 could allow connections to/from Service 10, as well as providing opportunities for car users, cyclists, etc.

- 11.2 Query as to why a smaller vehicle is not allocated to the service, rather than a double decker.

Steve Walker confirmed that the allocation is governed by the need for a high capacity vehicle to carry the schoolchildren to/from The Gordon Schools, and it makes sense to fully utilise the same vehicle for most of the day.

- 11.3 Complaint that the vehicles allocated to the service are not accessible for the elderly, mobility impaired, and parents with pushchairs, in view of the high steps at the entrance.

Steve Walker advised that a new low floor accessible double decker has been allocated to the service.

12. Service 308 (Aberchirder – Turriff – Inverurie)

- 12.1 Request from Councillor Walker for the 0645 hours ex Rothienorman – Inverurie (Monday to Friday) to be advanced to depart at 0635 hours, to allow a passenger to make a connection with Service 777 (Oldmeldrum – Inverurie – Westhill – Dyce/Aberdeen Airport), in order to travel to Westhill for work purposes.

Neil Stewart confirmed that he is aware of the request and regular passengers travelling on the 0645 hours departure have already been interviewed, with most if not all, expressing a preference for the existing times. He also confirmed that Bains Coaches have been requested to consider retarding Service 777, but the operator does not wish to do this either.

Doug Bain re-affirmed this from “the floor”.

Neil Stewart agreed to arrange for further on-bus surveys to be undertaken, but warned that it would be unfair to inconvenience several passengers for the benefit of one, though he expressed sympathy for the Westhill commuter.

13. Service 420 (Aberdeen – Kemnay)

- 13.1 Claim that the 1610 hours ex Aberdeen – Kemnay (Monday to Friday), frequently operates behind schedule.

Neil Stewart confirmed that this would be investigated in conjunction with Central Coaches.

14. Service 421 (Alford - Kemnay - Inverurie)

- 14.1 Request for pre-0800 hours (Saturday) and pre-0900 hours (Sunday) arrivals in Inverurie, for those working in the town.

Steve Walker and Neil Stewart confirmed that this would be considered in their respective service reviews.

- 14.2 Claim that insufficient information was provided to passengers, as well as car drivers, regarding the impact of the road closure on the A944 at Tillyfourie. This had resulted in a passenger travelling on the 0916 hours ex Inverurie – Alford being told he would have to alight at Sauchen, where they would need to book a taxi.

Neil Stewart confirmed that notices had been posted at all relevant bus stops, as well as on the buses, and a Council funded replacement service was provided between Inverurie and Alford via one of the proposed diversion routes. He also confirmed that Stagecoach Bluebird had been informed of this arrangement and that drivers should have informed passengers on boarding. He also confirmed that the Council had paid for a number of taxis between Sauchen and Alford due to passengers being unaware of the alternative service.

Steve Walker confirmed that the company will re-reimburse any passengers for additional travel costs occurred.

15. Fares and Ticketing

- 15.1 Request for information regarding any fares schemes to encourage more people to travel by bus, in particular children and young adults, coupled with a query regarding integrated fares with rail services.

Steve Walker advised the following:

- Stagecoach offers Megarider and Unirider (students only) tickets, which offer discounts for unlimited travel within a specified area for various periods, and these can be purchased on-line.
- In partnership with Aberdeenshire Council, the company has introduced an Under 21 Mega Discount Card, allowing 50% discount on weekly and 4-weekly Megariders for 16-20 year olds travelling on Service 35/35A between Aberdeen and Banff via Newmachar and Oldmeldrum, and there are plans to roll this out to other areas in the future.
(For information, Bains Coaches are also partners in the scheme, offering 50% discount on 10, 20 or 40 journey tickets.)
- Aberdeenshire Council, in partnership with bus companies, will be introducing an authority-wide voluntary multi-operator ticketing arrangement in February 2014, allowing the use of discounted “through tickets” and “travelcards” for travel on connecting services provided by more than one operator.
- Whilst it is extremely difficult to implement an integrated fares scheme which incorporates rail services, as there are issues relating to revenue distribution and competition law, An Aberdeen *Plusbus* ticket can be purchased at the same time as a train ticket and allows passengers onward travel from Aberdeen railway station to any destination within the City, and a *Railbus* ticket offers similar opportunities to some Aberdeenshire destinations, though this doesn't currently include the Kemnay and Inch areas.

16. Date of Next Meeting

Neil Stewart advised that the next meeting will be held in Westhill, if a suitable venue can be arranged, in spring 2014.