

BUCHAN AREA BUS FORUM

MINUTES OF MEETING ON THURSDAY 25th AUGUST 2022

BUCHAN HOUSE, PETERHEAD

In Attendance

Councillor D. Beagrie (Aberdeenshire Council) (Chair)

Councillor A. Simpson (Aberdeenshire Council)

Councillor C. Simpson (Aberdeenshire Council)

Councillor H. Powell (Aberdeenshire Council)

Councillor G. Crowson (Aberdeenshire Council)

Councillor L. McWhinnie (Aberdeenshire Council)

Neil Stewart (Principal Officer, Aberdeenshire Council)

Susan Watt (Senior Transport Officer, Aberdeenshire Council)

Daniel Laird (Commercial Director, Stagecoach Bluebird Ltd)

Craig Elrick (Operations Manager Buchan, Stagecoach Bluebird Ltd)

Amanda Roe (Buchan Area Manager)

Anne Johnson (Cruden Community Council)

Stuart Johnson (Cruden Community Council)

Eileen Styles (Peterhead Community Council)

B Wylie (Peterhead Community Council)

Stephen Calder (Peterhead Community Council)

Marna McDonald (Deer Community Council)

Greg Pearce (Stagecoach Bluebird Ltd)

Apologies

Councillor M. James (Aberdeenshire Council)

Councillor G. Hall (Aberdeenshire Council)

Julie Pickering (CATRA: Crimond Area Tenants and Residents Association)

1. Welcome and Introduction

Councillor Beagrie welcomed everyone to the meeting and introductions were given

2. Minutes of Meeting on 16th May 2019

The minutes were approved.

3. Matters arising from the Minutes

Neil Stewart provided the following update:

- Regarding the request for a bus shelter on the A952 at Fetterangus, a further site investigation is required to establish a possible location at the south end of the village, which would require footpath works and kerbing. Sufficient funding would need to be identified to cover the potential costs.
- Request for bus shelters on Buchan Road (near the bottom of Lewis Road), Fraserburgh, will now be progressed.

- Regarding the on-going issue with the location of the bus stop at Longhaven and vehicles parking in the layby to visit the shop, it was confirmed that, with the Longhaven community working together, matters are being kept under control.

This was acknowledged and agreed from the floor.

4. **Stagecoach Bluebird Update**

Daniel Laird provided the following update:

- Due to the pandemic, bus passenger numbers collapsed. Levels of usage have now increased to between 69% and 90% of pre-Covid levels across the Aberdeenshire network, but those on the Peterhead to Aberdeen corridor are still at less than 70% of pre-Covid levels.
- The Scottish Government's Covid-19 Support Grant and subsequent Network Support Grant, which have assisted operators in maintaining their commercial networks throughout the pandemic, will cease in early October 2022, and this will necessitate a review of such provision.
- There are no immediate plans to undertake service revisions in the Buchan Area, to allow bus services more time to recover and to receive public feedback.
- Driver shortages in 2021/2022 led to an overall successful advertising and recruitment campaign by the company, with Buchan Area services largely unaffected. In response to a query as to the age limit for those undertaking training for their bus driver's licence, it was confirmed that applicants must be at least 18 years of age and they are restricted to operating within 50 km (30 miles) of their home depot. The company also accounts for the length of time an applicant has held a full car driver's licence.
- The majority of contracts in the Buchan Area were retained by Stagecoach during the 2021 Council procurement exercise in the North area of Aberdeenshire, except for the Sunday contract between Boddam and Peterhead, which was awarded to Watermill Coaches.
- The roll out of the Young Persons' (Under 22s) Free Bus Travel Scheme, which commenced with effect from 31 January 2022, has been slower than expected in terms of the take up of Entitlement Cards, however recent trends have been more encouraging.
- The company introduced new Service S61 (Cruden Bay – Ellon Community Campus) on 23 August 2022 in response to requests from several parents/carers of "out-of-zone" schoolchildren residing in Cruden Bay, but who attend Ellon Academy. At the same time, a return journey on Service X60 (Peterhead - Ellon - Aberdeen) was extended within Peterhead and diverted via Ellon Community Campus to provide a similar facility for Ellon Academy pupils who reside in Peterhead. Such provision is based on these pupils using their entitlement cards under the Young Persons' (Under-22) Free Bus Travel Scheme.

5. **Aberdeenshire Council Update**

Neil Stewart provided the following update:

- Early in the Covid 19 pandemic, a small number of services in the Buchan Area were suspended, then a review of supported services was undertaken to contain spending within the allocated Budget for 2021-22, resulting in evening journeys on Service 66/66A

(Stuartfield – Mintlaw – Peterhead) and Service 69 (Fraserburgh – St Combs) being withdrawn, along with an early a.m. journey on Service 81 (Peterhead to Boddam), Service 270 (New Pitsligo – Fraserburgh) Saturday service, Service 452 shoppers service (Fraserburgh – Inverurie), and Service 747 (Peterhead to Aberdeen Airport). However, following confirmation of a revised Local Bus Budget later in 2021, all of these services were reinstated, with the exception of Service 747.

- The Budget for financial year 2022/23 is fully committed, which means that cuts to existing supported service provision would need to be considered if there is a need to reinstate any journeys withdrawn from the commercial network.

6. Public Transport Infrastructure / Information

- Request for the existing bus shelter on Berryden Road (Peterhead) next to the shops to be replaced with an enclosed facility.
- Request for the opening hours at Peterhead Interchange to be extended, to allow passengers to use the toilet facilities.

Craig Elrick confirmed that this would be investigated.

Amanda Roe confirmed the Council is working in partnership with local businesses through the Comfort Partnership, to provide accessible toilets within Peterhead Town centre and an update will be provided once an agreement is in place.

- The proposals for the replacement of the passenger shelter facilities at Mintlaw roundabout were welcomed.
- Issue of vehicles parking on Market Terrace (Strichen), near the Council depot, resulting in buses being unable to serve the bus stop, coupled with a request for bus stop road markings at this location.

Neil Stewart confirmed that this would be investigated.

- A timetable case on Queen Street (Peterhead) outside the Albert Hotel is damaged.

Neil Stewart confirmed that this would be investigated.

- It was raised that, at times, the electronic display screens show “phantom” buses which don’t appear.

Daniel Laird confirmed that Stagecoach is working with the Council on plans to rectify this.

- The improvements at Ellon Park and Ride were very much welcomed.
- Claim that the font size of timetables displayed at bus stops and shelters is too small.

Neil Stewart confirmed that they conform with Disability Discrimination Act regulations.

Daniel Laird confirmed that Stagecoach can provide printed timetables in a larger font if required.

- Comment that cantilever type shelters provide little protection against inclement weather.

Neil Stewart acknowledged this but confirmed that such facilities are normally installed due to footpath width restrictions.

- Query regarding the bus stop flag in Longhaven being wrongly named as the Post Office. Neil Stewart confirmed that this would be investigated.
- Request for greater availability of printed timetables.

Daniel Laird explained that the printing of timetables was suspended during the worst of the pandemic and whilst demand for them has reduced, plans are underway to restart printing of supplies.

7. Physical Accessibility Matters

Neil Stewart confirmed that this section is added to provide an opportunity for disabled people and others with mobility concerns to raise and discuss any physical and other accessibility barriers to using bus services.

- On-going concerns raised regarding the vehicles allocated to the Peterhead/Fraserburgh – Aberdeen corridor, relating to only 2 seats provided downstairs and issues accessing the stairway, resulting in those with restricted mobility experiencing difficulties in accessing seats.

Daniel Laird confirmed that, following public meetings several years ago, additional handrails and bells were installed, as well as improvements to the stairways. He acknowledged the difficulties experienced for some passengers and that the company has learned from this.

- In response to a query on driver training, Craig Elrick confirmed that all drivers must undertake a Certificate of Professional Competence, which requires 35 hours of periodic training every 5 years. Disability and Equality Awareness Training includes courses on mental health, deaf and autism awareness.
- Peterhead Community Council has undertaken a public accessibility study, which has highlighted difficulties experienced by passengers relating to some drivers not lowering, or not being able to lower, the ramps on the buses to allow passengers to board/alight, and in some cases not providing additional support to passengers requiring assistance.

Councillor Beagrie asked that the findings of the report be provided to Stagecoach.

- The matter of accessibility for those with buggies, etc., was also raised.

Daniel Laird highlighted the challenge operators can face with the accommodation of buggies when this conflicts with space allocated for wheelchairs.

- Request for toilet facilities on the Peterhead – Aberdeen vehicles, given the length of journeys.

Craig Elrick confirmed that this is not currently possible, with toilet facilities available at Peterhead Interchange and Union Square Bus Station.

8. Central Buchan services

- Concerns were raised regarding lack of fixed route bus services in the Central Buchan area, highlighting New Pitsligo and New Deer, with New Pitsligo situated only 4 miles from Strichen but not served by the Aberdeen – Fraserburgh mainline service.

Neil Stewart advised the provision of Service 51 (Fraserburgh – New Pitsligo – Ellon), Service 270 (Fraserburgh – New Pitsligo Circular) and Service 272 (Fraserburgh – New Pitsligo - Banff), whilst pointing out that Central Buchan A2B dial-a-bus also serves the area, where the only restriction is that passengers are required to book in advance of travel.

- Query as to whether passengers are required to pay a fare on Central Buchan A2B and whether there are any restrictions on categories of passenger.

Neil Stewart confirmed that the service is open to the public, and passengers must pay a fare, unless utilising a National Entitlement Card, including Young Persons (Under 22).

- Concerns were raised that bookings by telephone appear to be prioritised over email bookings and, with the cost-of-living crisis, some people may be more reluctant to phone.

Neil Stewart confirmed that he would arrange for this to be investigated.

- It was raised that Councillors would appreciate a better understanding of the operation of Central Buchan A2B, as it is felt that some passengers are unsure as to how it works. A meeting with the Passenger Transport Unit was requested.
- Request for information on Be-link'D community transport.

Amanda Roe confirmed that this free service is operated by Buchan Dial-a-Community Bus with electric, accessible vehicles and is designed to meet the needs of vulnerable adults and children who cannot access fixed route bus services to attend work, medical appointments etc. within the Central Buchan area. Seats on the bus must be booked in advance and are subject to availability. The service is funded by Fairer Aberdeenshire Fund, has been led and developed by several Community Planning partners including Aberdeenshire Council, NHS Grampian, Buchan Development Partnership, Foyer, and the Department of Work and Pensions. The service is currently suspended for evaluation and an update will be provided at the next meeting.

9. Peterhead – Aberdeen Services and Peterhead Town Services

- Request for passengers travelling wholly within Aberdeen City to be excluded from travelling on the Buchan Express services between Aberdeen and Peterhead due to Aberdeenshire bound passengers being unable to board in King Street/Ellon Road when the coaches are full on arrival.

Daniel Laird confirmed that the number of bus stops served on King Street were reduced in the past, but complaints were received from Aberdeenshire bound passengers not being able to board in the area. He also confirmed that he was unaware of any instances of such journeys having reached full capacity in recent years, the exception being on 13 August 2022, the day of the Brewdog AGM held in Aberdeen.

- Request for a later Mon - Sat bus from Peterhead to Cruden Bay, the last departure currently being at 2210 hours.

Daniel Laird advised that this would be difficult, given current scheduling constraints.

- Request for services to serve Buchan Gateway, at the south of Peterhead, to serve the increasing number of businesses located in that area.

Daniel Laird confirmed that this has previously been discussed with the Council and there is not sufficient spare time within Town Service schedules to serve the area, which could also get congested. He confirmed that this would be borne in mind in the next service review.

- It was raised that the driver of Service 84 (Chapel Street – Inverugie Circular) due to arrive on Kirk Street at 1334 hours on 6 June 2022, drove past a passenger, signalling that he was unable to stop. No reply has been received to his complaint to the company.

Daniel Laird confirmed that this would be investigated.

10. Other Matters

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

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

- Query regarding ongoing issues relating to the Under-22 entitlement card application process, resulting in some people not receiving their cards.

Daniel Laird advised that the Scottish Government's launch of the Under 22 Entitlement Card was not high profile as it was during a period when travel in general was not being promoted. Therefore, take up was low to begin with and this was compounded by various issues relating to the initial process of obtaining and issuing the cards. He advised that this has resulted in only around 400,000 out of a possible 990,000 being issued to date, but numbers are now increasing.

11. Next Meeting

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