

MARR AREA BUS FORUM

MINUTES OF MEETING ON THURSDAY 3RD NOVEMBER 2022

UPPER HALL, ALFORD HALL

In Attendance

Councillor J. Goodhall (Aberdeenshire Council) (Chair)

Councillor S. Brown (Aberdeenshire Council)

Neil Stewart (Principal Officer, Aberdeenshire Council)

Susan Watt (Senior Transport Officer, Aberdeenshire Council)

Marcin Kaminski (Commercial Analyst, Stagecoach Bluebird)

Daryl Mitchell (Commercial Planner, Stagecoach Bluebird)

Molly McIntosh (Braemar Community Council)

Virginia Fortesque (NHSE/HTAP)

Elizabeth Henry (Bus User)

Duncan Ross (Bus User)

Ann Stephen (Bus User)

Catherine Pirie (Bus User)

Anne Smith (Bus User)

Alan Dawson (Bus User)

Alice Dawson (Bus User)

Apologies

Councillor R. Withey (Aberdeenshire Council)

Councillor A. Kloppert (Aberdeenshire Council)

Carole Paterson (Bus User)

Alasdair Ross (Banchory Community Council)

1. Welcome and Introduction

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

2. Minutes of Meeting on 12 November 2019

The minutes were approved.

3. Matters arising from the Minutes

- In response to Councillor Blackett's request for a Real Time facility at the bus stops located at the bus terminus and Co-op in Braemar, Neil Stewart confirmed there are plans to provide an e-paper display at the main bus stop but was unable to provide a precise timescale as the PTU (Passenger Transport Unit) are currently in discussions with the provider and Stagecoach, regarding the provision of information on disruption to services via such displays and hopefully will be resolved this financial year.
- In response to the complaint regarding the Real Time screen at Aboyne Interchange (Ballater Road) being damaged, Neil Stewart confirmed that the facility has been repaired, and the browser updated.
- In response to the query as to whether other information, such as tourism related material, could be displayed on the totem unit at Huntly Square Interchange, Neil Stewart confirmed

that such information was currently provided below the bus times displayed, but he recommends that specific requests be submitted to the Council.

- In response to the query as to whether an e-ink display could be provided at the bus stop in Lumphanan, highlighting that Lumphanan Community Council is currently investigating the possibility of providing tablets at the Square to update residents with local information, including bus times etc, Neil Stewart confirmed that there were plans to provide an e-paper display at one bus stop in the village next financial year.
- In response to the request for timetable publicity to identify journeys on Services 201/202/203 (Aberdeen - Ballater/Braemar) which can carry bicycles, Marcin Kaminski confirmed that double deck vehicles have been allocated to the corridor, replacing the coaches, which has improved reliability, but the vehicles are not equipped to transport bicycles. However, they are currently investigating funding to provide a means to carry bicycles.
- In response to the claim that Service 10 (Aberdeen - Huntly - Elgin - Inverness) has capacity issues at times, Marcin Kaminski confirmed that following an investigation, capacity issues were not identified on the corridor, but he acknowledged that passenger numbers are continuing to increase on the corridor and rail strikes have impacted on capacity, but they would continue to monitor the corridor. He advised that double deck vehicles have been allocated where possible to overcome capacity issues.
- In response to the complaint regarding insufficient seats being available on a number of journeys from Aberdeen to Huntly on Service 10 (Aberdeen – Huntly – Elgin - Inverness), referring to the 1130 hours ex Aberdeen, and between 1245 hours and 1500 hours ex Aberdeen, Daryl Mitchell confirmed that following an investigation, no capacity issues were identified on these journeys, but they would continue to monitor the service.

4. Stagecoach Bluebird Update

Marcin Kaminski and Daryl Mitchell provided the following update:

- Apologies were expressed following the mailbox utilised during the recent consultation on the Service X20 (Aberdeen – Alford) was not monitored after the consultation was completed on 11 September 2022. All emails received after this date will receive a reply and an automatic response will now be applied, informing people to email Stagecoach on customer.services@stagecoachbus.com.
- Revisions were implemented to Service X20/220 (Alford – Kemnay – Aberdeen) on 31 October 2022, which will be monitored over the coming months. Recent stormy weather has resulted in delays to some services.
- The company has recently purchased 22 electric buses, which are currently operating within Aberdeen on Services 59 and 727. A further 13 electric buses are due to arrive in the coming months. This will have a positive knock-on effect on Aberdeenshire services.
- Service 22 (Inverurie Town Service) has been re-instated by the Council, receiving positive feedback. Neil Stewart confirmed the contract will operate until the 31 March 2023 and will be monitored over this period.

5. Aberdeenshire Council Update

Neil Stewart provided the following update:

- Early in the Covid 19 pandemic, a small number of services in the Marr Area were suspended, then a review of supported services to contain spending within the allocated Budget for 2021-22 led to further withdrawals. However, this Budget was later revised and all supported bus services in the Marr Area were reinstated.
- The Council undertook a tendering process in 2021, predominantly in North Aberdeenshire. Stagecoach Bluebird retained Services 301 (Macduff – Huntly), 303 (Turriff – Huntly) and the schoolday component of Service 231 (Alford – Huntly). RS Minicoaches operate Service 231 on Saturdays.
- The Budget for financial year 2022/23 is all but 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.
- The Under 22 Entitlement Scheme has been rolled out and the number of cards being issued continues to increase, with 64% in Aberdeenshire. The Council appreciates that this has led to increased and changing demands throughout Aberdeenshire, most of which can be absorbed by the commercial network, but this is being monitored.
- There are plans to re-register the dedicated school contract between Strathdon and Alford Academy (Service 219), which will allow farepayers to travel. It is hoped this will be implemented from Monday 9 January 2023.

6. Public Transport Infrastructure / Information

- Councillor Brown queried the procedure for reporting damage to bus infrastructure.

Neil Stewart confirmed that all requests and damages should be reported to the Council by emailing public.transport@aberdeenshire.gov.uk.

- Query as to how frequently bus infrastructure are inspected and cleaned.

Susan Watt confirmed a 4-weekly inspection programme was undertaken but this can vary depending on other work commitments, such as updating timetables due to service revisions. A separate cleaning programme operated as required.

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.

- Councillor Brown queried the procedure to contact the operator on these matters, highlighting some passengers experiencing difficulties boarding coaches without the availability of a ramp, highlighting at times, this prevents passengers from travelling.

Daryl Mitchell confirmed that drivers undertake a check on the vehicle prior to leaving the depot, including the operation of the wheelchair ramp. If a defect is recorded, the vehicle will not leave the depot. However, issues may arise on service and where appropriate, taxis can be provided for onward travel. He advised passengers to contact customer services on these matters on customer.services@stagecoachbus.com.

- Request for contact details to report access issues to a bus stop within Alford.

Neil Stewart confirmed that he would arrange for his colleagues to contact the passenger direct for further details to resolve the issue. Following the meeting, the passenger was contacted on this matter.

8. Deeside Corridor Services

- Request for the 0711 hours ex Ballater to Braemar to commence from Aboyne for those travelling for work.

Daryl Mitchell confirmed that the vehicle is located at the depot in Ballater and there is insufficient time to travel to/from Aboyne prior to commencing the journey in Ballater.

- Request for the am journey from Torphins to Banchory operated during Covid, to be re-instated to allow those travelling for work in Banchory.

Daryl Mitchell confirmed that a reduced timetable was implemented over the Covid epidemic on the corridor, and it was not possible to re-instate the journey within the current timetable.

- Query as to why the fare between Banchory to Kincardine O Neil is significantly higher than the fare between Banchory to Torphins.

Marcin Kaminski confirmed that distances between fare stages are not necessarily uniform, with other factors influencing how fares are set, such as patronage or main travel patterns as is the case on the corridor.

- Concern raised regarding lack of bus services serving Tarland, Lumphanan and Torphins, coupled with a request for a service which connects into Service 201 (Aberdeen – Banchory – Braemar).

Neil Stewart advised that the Council considered an experimental digital demand responsive transport service in the area, which did not materialise for various reasons. He confirmed that the Local Bus Supported Budget for 2023/24 is fully committed and we are currently predicting a funding shortfall next financial year.

Daryl Mitchell advised that a previous Service 210 (Aberdeen – Tarland - Ballater) operated in the area but was withdrawn due to low passenger numbers and it was considered not commercially viable to continue operating the service.

- Claim regarding late running and breakdowns on the corridor.

Marcin Kaminski advised that the fleet has been replaced with newer vehicles, mostly double deck buses, over the last 9 months, which has improved reliability on the corridor. He asked for dates and times of issues to allow these to be investigated.

- Request for the Braemar – Pitlochry/Blairgowrie service to be re-instated, highlighting that that a petition has been signed by 140 signatures.

Neil Stewart confirmed that funding was previously provided by local authorities and Cairngorms National Park Authority to provide a weekday service. However, funding was withdrawn, and Stagecoach operated a reduce commercial service over the summer school

holiday the following year, which was not commercially viable due to low patronage and the service was withdrawn.

Daryl Mitchell advised that the service would not be commercially viable at this time. However, groups can hire a bus and driver and sell their own tickets for travel on the service, which can provide a profit depending on ticket sales.

9. Donside Corridor Services

- Concerns were raised at the overall reduction in level of service via Monymusk on Service X20 (Aberdeen – Alford) following the changes implemented on 31 October 2022, in particular the withdrawal of 0549 hrs ex Alford to Aberdeen via Monymusk on weekdays.

Neil Stewart confirmed that the Council investigated the journey and the average demand from Alford was less than 1 passenger per day and 1 passenger per day from Monymusk.

10. Huntly Area Services

- Request for a bus service to serve Largue.

Daryl Mitchell confirmed that it would not be commercially viable to introduce a service to Largue but would keep this under review.

- Request for additional services to serve Rhynie and Lumsden area.

Neil Stewart advised that a Demand Response Transport or Dial-A-Ride type of service would be best suited to serve the area but confirmed the Local Bus Supported budget was fully committed for 2023/2024.

It was raised that a Dial-A-Ride type service operated in Moray or Community Transport would provide a suitable alternative transport but acknowledged the difficulties in recruiting drivers.

11. A.O.B

- Claim regarding passengers are unable to phone on a Saturday to book the Inverurie Ready2Go, which prevents some passengers from travelling.

Neil Stewart confirmed that phone lines are open Monday to Friday, with the app available to book on Monday to Saturday.

- Query as to whether paper timetables would be re-introduced.

Marcin Kaminski confirmed that paper timetables were withdrawn during the Covid epidemic, but the company were reviewing re-introduction.

- Thanks were expressed from the floor to Neil Stewart for all his help and hard work over the years, both at Bus Forums and in his daily job, following his announcement that he would be retiring in November 2022.

12. Next Meeting

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