

GARIOCH AREA BUS FORUM

MINUTES OF MEETING ON THURSDAY 1st SEPTEMBER 2022

FRIENDSHIP ROOM, KEMNAY VILLAGE HALL

In Attendance

Councillor M. Ewenson (Aberdeenshire Council) (Chair)

Councillor S. Payne (Aberdeenshire Council)
Councillor C. Miller (Aberdeenshire Council)
Neil Stewart (Principal Officer, Aberdeenshire Council)
Marion MacKay (Principal Officer, Aberdeenshire Council)
Susan Watt (Senior Transport Officer, Aberdeenshire Council)
Madelyne Simpson (Transport Officer, Aberdeenshire Council)
Julian Sirbu (Assistant Operations Manager, Stagecoach Bluebird)
Daryl Mitchell (Commercial Planner, Stagecoach Bluebird)
Bill Duthie (Kintore Community Council)
Roddy MacInnes (Fintray Community Council)
Sue Wainman (Kemnay Community Council)
Carolynne Fishburn (Visual Impairment Team)
Margaret Basley (Kemnay Newsletter and bus user)
Chris Fryer (Bus User)
Douglas Bain (Bus User)
Mary Murray (Bus User)
Gladys Duguid (Bus User)
William McKenzie (Bus User)
Isobel McIntosh (Grampian Opportunities)
Yvonne Gordon (Grampian Opportunities)
Ryan Johnson (Dates-n-Mates)

Apologies

Councillor I. Mason (Aberdeenshire Council)
Councillor I. Walker (Aberdeenshire Council)
Councillor H. Smith (Aberdeenshire Council)
Councillor J. Whyte (Aberdeenshire Council)
Councillor D. Keating (Aberdeenshire Council)
Dr F. Parley

1. Welcome and Introduction

Councillor Ewenson welcomed everyone to the meeting and introductions were given

2. Minutes of Meeting on 5th December 2019

Due to no one present having attended the last meeting, the minutes could not be approved.

3. Matters arising from the Minutes

There were no matters arising.

4. Aberdeenshire Council Update

Marion Mackay provided the following update:

- The Council operated *A2B dial-a-bus* services provide a door-to-door service, generally for older and disabled people or those unable to access a bus service, Journeys are booked by phoning (01467) 535 333. The Garioch area services are Inverurie Town (Monday to Friday); Hatton of Fintray to Inverurie: (Monday only); Kemnay / Kintore – Inverurie: (Wednesday only) and Auchleven/Leslie/Insch – Inverurie (Thursday only, which only started last week).
- The digital demand responsive *Ready2Go Around Inverurie* was introduced in August 2021 operating in the Inverurie, Oldmeldrum, Insch, Rothienorman, Monymusk, Kemnay and Kintore area, with bus journeys booked through the Ready2Go app on your smartphone or by calling the Council on (01467) 535 333. The service does not have fixed routes or times – these are determined by passenger bookings.
- Transport consultants were asked to evaluate the service and concluded there was an increase in people using the bus services when compared to pre Covid passenger numbers, new people are utilising the service, with around a quarter making new trips, which are providing benefits, such as reducing social isolation, improving independence, providing health benefits, and providing a high satisfaction rate. However, the cost of operating the service is expensive and the software system does not group passengers as well as expected which is raised with the system supplier on an ongoing basis. The consultants recommended that the pilot be extended, and the Council should seek external funding, e.g, from Transport Scotland. The Council has committed to running the service as a pilot up to August 2023 – alternative options would have been to make the service permanent; withdraw the service and/or re-instate some fixed route services. Consideration is being given to the detailed suggestions set out in the consultants' report with short-term objectives to improve the performance of the software and/or identify more suitable software systems.
- Various issues were highlighted and discussed including those submitted by email by Dr Parley.
- Assigned pick-up locations can be a distance away from the requested bus stop.

Marion Mackay confirmed that the system includes a maximum walking distance from the requested journey start to the assigned pick-up stop and calculates the walk time required. Without this permitted walk distance, the system would decline more requests however she understands the frustration this can create.

- Repeated concerns that the service does not cater for those residing in Insch, with passengers frequently unable to book at the time requested, even when trying to book 7 days in advance, highlighting those travelling with Under 22 Entitlement Cards, or to/from employment or medical appointment, frequently having to resort to alternative travel. A claim was made that booked buses had on occasion not arrived. Some comments from the Insch Community Group page from Facebook were raised at the meeting.

Marion Mackay advised that digital demand responsive transport is a new concept of bus travel and acknowledged the failings which are investigated.

- Concerns raised regarding the difficulty in booking buses whilst at other times up to three buses arrive in Inch at around the same time, sometimes picking up only 1 passenger per vehicle.

Marion Mackay confirmed that the Council is aware of instances such as these which are highlighted with the software supplier on an ongoing basis.

- It was raised that a bus booked from Inch and Monymusk did not turn up and feedback had been submitted but no response received.

Marion Mackay confirmed that this would be investigated.

- Request for journeys to be booked more than 7 days in advance, to ensure those travelling for employment and medical appointments can secure transport.

Marion Mackay noted the request and confirmed that currently this is not permissible.

- Request for *Ready2Go Around Inverurie* to operate a circular fixed route service, to provide Inch residents with Monday to Saturday timetabled journeys.

Marion Mackay advised the possibility of including some timetabled journeys was considered but is not possible to set this up within the software system and if an entire timetabled service was provided this would no longer be digital DRT.

- It was questioned whether the review will result in action and lessons learned to provide an improved, reliable service.

Marion Mackay advised the pilot was implemented to trial digital demand responsive transport in Aberdeenshire to replace traditional fixed route bus services, following a reduction in passenger usage over the years and a change to passenger travel patterns due an increase in people working from home, ordering shopping online and on-line medical appointments etc, especially during Covid. She advised that digital DRT is a relatively new concept within the UK and whilst it is appreciated that it does not meet all needs, it was introduced to try to reverse the decline in passenger demand by modernising bus services.

- Request for Service 41 (Inch – Inverurie) to be re-instated, to provide a reliable, fixed route timetable for those in residing in Inch, coupled with the need to listen to difficulties endured by Inch passengers and ensure improvements are made to overcome these issues.

Marion Mackay acknowledged the issues raised.

- Concerns were raised regarding the proposed withdrawal of Service 22 (Inverurie Town Service) and the additional passenger demand this will put on an already busy service, resulting in a further decrease in availability for passengers, coupled with a request for the Service 22 to continue operating.

Marion Mackay agreed that this would increase demand on the service.

Daryl Mitchell said that passenger demand on Service 22 had decreased, and the service was not commercially viable.

- Query as to whether the service can be extended to serve Hatton of Fintray, which currently has no bus service.

Marion Mackay confirmed that there are currently no plans to extend the service, as this would put further pressure on Ready2Go and could negatively impact existing passengers. The request could only be considered by changing the overall Ready2Go operating area, e.g. by withdrawing it from another area.

- It was suggested that the Under 22 scheme has increased passenger demand, resulting in further difficulties for those in the Inch area being able to travel.

Marion Mackay confirmed that the free scheme has increased demand.

- It was raised that initially *Ready2Go* provided an excellent service for Inch but increasing passenger demand has resulted in the service becoming less reliable to those out with Inverurie. Requests were made for additional buses and the introduction of a Sunday and evening service.

Marion Mackay advised there are no plans to introduce additional vehicles or provide a Sunday or evening service, highlighting the additional cost required to introduce these changes.

Neil Stewart provided the following update:

- Early in the Covid 19 pandemic, a small number of services in the Garioch 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 Garioch Area were reinstated.
- The Council undertook a tendering process in 2021, predominantly in North Aberdeenshire. Service 49 (Ellon – Oldmeldrum – Inverurie) was retained by Stagecoach Bluebird, as were weekly shoppers' services 248 (New Byth – Fyvie – Inverurie), 403 (Kingseat – Kinmuck – Inverurie) and Service 452 (Fraserburgh – New Deer – Inverurie).
- 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. 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.

5. Stagecoach Bluebird Update

Julian Sirbu and Daryl Mitchell provided the following update:

- The company is consulting on proposed revisions to commercial bus services in the Garioch Area with effect from 31 October 2022, as follows:
- Service X20/220 (Alford – Kemnay – Aberdeen) will operate hourly between Kemnay and Aberdeen, but will no longer serve Blackburn, Great Northern Road and St Machar Drive. The service will have no picking-up/setting-down restrictions and will be re-routed via Haudagain Bypass, Hilton Drive, Westburn Drive, Westburn Road, Hutcheon Street, Gallowgate, Broad Street and Union Street, reducing journey times by 11 minutes.

- Concerns were raised from the floor regarding loss of the link between Kemnay and Blackburn.

Julian Sirbu confirmed that this has been raised during the consultation process.

(Post meeting, the company reconsidered and decided to maintain the link)

- Concerns were also raised regarding withdrawal of the route section on Great Northern Road near the St Machar Drive area for those accessing Aberdeen University. It was also raised that the Great Northern Road area is listed as deprived according to the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SMID).

Daryl Mitchell confirmed that travel to/from this area was extremely limited pre-Covid and the proposed route goes some way to fulfilling requests both for faster journeys and improved access to Aberdeen Royal Infirmary. He also advised that it is possible for passengers to connect with the frequent Service 727 (City Centre - Airport) in Bucksburn to access the Great Northern Road area.

- Service 37 (Aberdeen – Inverurie) will be truncated to run between Kintore and Inverurie only, operating via a loop around Kintore via School Road and Hall Forest Road and will serve Kintore Railway Station.
- A new Service 9 is proposed, operating hourly between Inverurie and Aberdeen via Blackburn and the service 10 route within Aberdeen.
- Service 5/6 (Aberdeen – Westhill) will be revised to provide faster journeys, with a reduction in journeys serving Prime 4 and Peregrine Road (Westhill).
- Within Aberdeen City, Service 59 frequency is being reduced to 15 mins on a Saturday and Service 727 has had time redistributed to provide a more punctual service.
- 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.
- The roll out of the Under 22 Entitlement scheme at the end of January 2022 has been slow, but numbers are increasing, with just below 50% in Aberdeenshire.

6. Public Transport Infrastructure / Information

- Request for the provision of a bus stop on the A96 at Marshall Farm Shop.

Susan Watt confirmed that this was currently being investigated in conjunction with Transport Scotland, with the A96 being a trunk road.

- Request for the display screens at the stances at Union Square bus station to provide updated Real Time information, when buses depart from a different stance, coupled with the use of a tannoy system to inform passengers.

Daryl Mitchell confirmed that drivers should inform passengers when there is a change to their allocated stances and there is also a tannoy system in operation. He added that those with the Stagecoach Bluebird app can access Real Time tracking information.

(Post meeting, the company confirmed that signs have been fitted for drivers at Aberdeen Bus Station to remind them to make passengers aware if they're not leaving from their allocated stance, as well as signs to advise passengers on stances)

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.

Julian Sirbu confirmed that, following public meetings held 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.

- Issues with lack of luggage space on the electric buses.

Daryl Mitchell confirmed that there are restrictions due to the maximum weight load on the bus, but other options are being explored.

8. Westhill, Skene and Echt Services

- Request for Service 5/6 to serve the bus stop at the turning circle at the top of Westhill Drive near Blacklaws Brae and Meadowlands Drive (Westhill).

Daryl Mitchell confirmed that, following a review, the service was withdrawn from that area of the town due to very low passenger demand.

- Request for additional journeys to serve Echt.

Julian Sibbu confirmed that there are no plans for this, as journeys were previously withdrawn due to very low passenger numbers. He added that this was compounded by issues with drivers having to undertake a difficult turning manoeuvre within Echt, at the site of the old petrol station.

9. Other Services

- Request for the provision of bus services from Inverurie to Fraserburgh and Buckie.

Neil Stewart explained that such direct services have not proved to be commercially viable in the past, but it is possible to access Fraserburgh via Ellon (Service 49: Inverurie – Oldmeldrum - Ellon and Services X67/X68: Aberdeen - Ellon - Fraserburgh) and Buckie via Oldmeldrum (Service 49 and Service 35: Aberdeen - Oldmeldrum – Buckie - Elgin).

10. Next Meeting

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