

Minutes of the Caithness Bus Users Group

Date: 11.06.14

Time: 3.30pm

Location: Norseman Hotel, Wick

Present

Trudy Morris	Caithness Chamber of Commerce, CBUG Chairperson
David Swanson	Caithness Chamber of Commerce, Minute Secretary
Roger Saxon	Highland Council
Willie Mackay	Highland Council
Steve Walker	Stagecoach

In Attendance

John McLeod	Caithness Mental Health Support Group
Linda Evans	Caithness Mental Health Support Group
Gordon Calder	North of Scotland Newspapers
James Smith	
Laura Gunn	
Linda Torley	

1. Welcome

The Chairperson, Trudy Morris, welcomed everyone and introduced all representatives present.

2. Apologies

No apologies were received.

3. Minutes of Last Meeting

The minutes of the last meeting (held on 12th December 2014) were approved by all present.

4. Actions

CBUG(2013)M001/A002 – *Stagecoach to look into altering Canisbay / Gills service. Ongoing*

It had been agreed at a previous meeting that the Chamber would try to progress this matter. David Swanson confirmed he had emailed Canisbay Community Council but had not received a response. It was agreed that the Chamber would continue to attempt to make contact with the Community Council and report back to the group.

CBUG(2013)M001/A004 – Stagecoach and Chamber to liaise with NHS regarding patient transport issues. Complete.

Trudy met with the NHS and Scottish Patient Transport service and held a follow-up meeting in January. Reassurances were given that the NHS were endeavouring to change appointments to suitable times to meet the needs of patients with transport difficulties, and in some instances were providing taxis and booking patients into B&Bs.

CBUG(2013)M002/A001 – Chamber to contact Highland Council regarding Towerhill Road bus stop and incorrect information at service points. Ongoing.

David Swanson confirmed he had been in touch with Neil Young at Highland Council about this matter. John McLeod noted that there is still no timetable in the Towerhill Road stop.

Roger Saxon noted the chair of Thurso Community Council says that there is a timetable in place

It was agreed that David Swanson would continue to follow up on this matter with Highland Council.

CBUG(2013)M002/A002 – Steve Walker to contact David Swanson when printed timetables are available. Complete.

This was actioned and printed timetables are now available

CBUG(2013)M002/A003 – Steve Walker to review Stagecoach's schedule for printing timetables. Complete.

Steve Walker confirmed that this has been done and a new process is in place. Trudy asked when the next service change is planned – Steve was unable to confirm at this time.

5. Stagecoach

Steve delivered a brief update from Stagecoach. Of note:

- The X99 service has been changed and now leaves Inverness 10 minutes earlier to ensure it can meet the ferry to Orkney.
- There has been a request from Bettyhill to continue the service there during the school holidays
- The concessionary fare scheme continues and funding for it appears to be stable

6. Bus Service Issues

John McLeod again raised the issue of the lack of a timetable at the Towerhill Road bus stop.

He also noted that he had issues with how the meeting was advertised – he felt that it was not well-enough publicised.

Trudy agreed to talk to the funders of the group regarding a budget for press advertising.

CBUG(2014)M001/A001 – *Trudy Morris to talk to Highland Council / DSRL regarding advertising budget*

Steve Walker said he would check that posters had been displayed but noted that as far as he was aware they were put onto all the buses.

Trudy asked Gordon Calder if he could check whether the Bus Users Group, as a community initiative, could advertise for free – he agreed to do so.

CBUG(2014)M001/A002 – *Gordon Calder to check possibility of free advertising for the group*

Willie Mackay noted that he had received no information about the meeting and John McLeod said he had received no email. Trudy gave her assurances that this would be looked into and would not happen again.

CBUG(2014)M001/A003 – *David Swanson to check and update contact lists for Bus Users Group*

Laura Gunn raised her concern that there could be a service cut on the 81 service (Thurso – Castletown – Wick), as she is reliant on this service to get to work.

Steve Walker said that he didn't expect any changes on this service but that he could not guarantee it would remain as is. Laura noted that the 81 service is sparse compared to the 82 (Thurso – Halkirk – Wick) service. Steve noted that they could look at specific needs e.g. around shift times, but that the number of buses on a route is ultimately based on the number of people using that particular service.

Steve noted that the service which runs as a school bus is guaranteed, and that it will run during the school holidays if that is currently the case. He explained that the contract for this is in place until 2017.

Trudy said that the Highland Council would shortly be looking at these contracts, and that the Bus Users Group would keep this service in their sights. Roger Saxon confirmed that the council already subsidises some services on this route.

Laura asked which services are subsidised, and noted that she currently starts travelling at 7.40am to get into work for 8.50am. Steve said he would be happy to check which services are subsidised and that he would talk to the NHS about demand.

He further noted that there have been changes relating to the fuel rebate and concessionary fares, and that reductions in service have been fewer in Caithness than in other areas.

CBUG(2014)M001/A004 – *Steve Walker to confirm Highland Council subsidised routes*

CBUG(2014)M001/A005 – *Steve Walker to talk to NHS about demand for employee transport*

Roger Saxon mentioned that the Council will be launching a green transport website and that all employers should be considering their employees transport needs.

There was some further discussion of the lack of buses through Castletown. Steve noted that alternative solutions have been developed in the past – Stagecoach have worked with Helmsdale Community Council to support community transport in the town.

Steve noted that there is more demand on the 82 service – Linda enquired whether the majority of these passengers are going to Wick. It was agreed that Steve would monitor passenger numbers on the Halkirk route.

CBUG(2014)M001/A006 – *Steve Walker to monitor passenger numbers on the 82 Thurso-Halkirk-Wick route*

Steve reiterated that services have to make money. He noted that there used to be bus route development grants for pump-priming routes, but that these no longer exist. In the absence of these, he is unwilling to take a huge revenue risk on a route which may prove unsuccessful.

John Macleod raised the issue of older buses in Caithness, noting that Orkney Islands Council won't accept buses over 15 years old. He said he had heard that older buses from Orkney are being shipped across the Pentland Firth to Caithness, and asked why it is acceptable to use these buses in Caithness.

Steve noted that the terms and conditions set by Orkney Islands Council for subsidised services stipulate that no buses over a certain age be used on these services, and that almost all the routes on Orkney are subsidised.

It was noted by both Roger Saxon and Steve that Highland Council does have a set standard for their subsidised services, but that age profile is not part of this. It was agreed that Roger would discuss the age profile of buses in Caithness with Highland Council.

There was some discussion of the reliability of buses in Caithness. Steve noted that Stagecoach have a robust maintenance regime and service their buses every 21 days. He felt that in terms of breakdown reliability, Caithness is as good as if not better than other areas.

Trudy enquired as to whether they publish any stats and, if so, whether the Chamber could have access to these. Steve confirmed and agreed to add David to the mailing list for these statistics.

CBUG(2014)M001/A007 – *Steve Walker to add David Swanson to list for bus maintenance / performance statistics*

CBUG(2014)M001/A008 – *Roger Saxon to talk to Highland Council about age profile of buses in Caithness*

John raised an issue with the accessibility of buses, given the rising age profile in the country, and enquired what provisions Stagecoach makes for those with mobility problems.

Trudy asked whether this would be covered by legislation surrounding disability. Steve noted that this would have some impact – buses by 2016 will all be low-floor. He noted that coaches compliant with the Disability Discrimination Act actually have steeper steps than those currently running.

John enquired as to the technical distinction between a bus and a coach – Steve confirmed that a bus is governed to do less than a certain speed and doesn't need to have seatbelts. He noted that in Caithness, Dounreay specify the use of coaches for their contract and therefore some of the local services will also run coaches.

A question was raised regarding the help available for those with learning disabilities. Steve noted that they encourage drivers to offer help to those with difficulties, but that he couldn't guarantee every driver would do so. He noted that general feedback e.g. from Bus Users Scotland has been good. He said they have worked with disability support groups to try and help those with both mental and physical disabilities.

Willie Mackay raised an issue with the X97 from Dunbeath to Wick – he felt that the service compares poorly to the X99. In particular, he noted that the service is often very cold. Steve noted that this is partly due to the doors being opened on a regular basis and partly due to the engine being turned off while waiting at Dunbeath.

Trudy asked whether there was a possibility of running the engine for a few minutes before the X99 is due to arrive. Steve noted that they have given a commitment to have the engines switched off while waiting, as this was affecting local residents, and that to run the engines unnecessarily goes against their green policy.

John asked why – given that a new bus wash has been installed in Thurso – the buses are still dirty. Steve explained firstly that in poor weather it doesn't take long for a bus to get dirty and secondly that the bus wash has recently had issues with sensors on the brushes and is currently out of commission. Steve further noted that Wick doesn't have a bus wash, so buses operating in that area get washed less often.

Trudy felt that it was important to acknowledge that – given Steve's position within Stagecoach – that he takes the time to come up and engage with local users. There was general agreement with this.

Steve noted that it's important for him to find out what is happening at a grassroots level and that he values the input from local bus users. He said he also has mystery travellers across the region who take regular trips and report to him directly.

Roger asked whether mystery travellers were ever used in Caithness. Steve noted that Bus Users Scotland had recently carried out a trip around the north of Scotland and that their report was generally positive. He agreed to forward this on to David Swanson.

CBUG(2014)M001/A009 – *Steve Walker to forward Bus Users Scotland report to David Swanson*

Roger asked whether there is an easy complaints system – Steve noted that they have a number of systems in place including local email and phone contacts. He also noted that as of August they would be live on Twitter, allowing easy reporting of problems in near real time.

Steve noted that they have been looking at putting wi-fi on the X99 but that there are issues with signal on parts of the A9. Steve noted that the capability is there, should they find a solution.

John raised an issue with attempting to get a timetable from the Highland Council service point – that no timetables were being delivered to these points. He asked if Steve could put timetables into the rail station as well. Steve confirmed that he would be happy to do this – they put out timetables to anyone who is happy to take them.

Some issues were raised with confusion over service changes. Steve noted that if they put timetables out in public too far in advance, it tends to cause more confusion, but that they do put notices on the affected buses. He said that they would also use Twitter to assist in this matter. He did note that however much they attempt to make it clear, some users will miss the information.

John again raised the issue of timetables missing from bus stops. David noted that he could raise issues with timetables and bus stops with Neil Young at the Highland Council.

CBUG(2014)M001/A010 – *David Swanson to liaise with Neil Young on issues relating to timetables and bus stops*

7. Any Other Business

No other business was raised.

8. Date of Next Meeting

The next meeting of the Caithness Bus Users Group was agreed to be held in Thurso on the 5th December at 2pm, venue to be confirmed.

Trudy Morris thanked all for attending and closed the meeting.

Actions ongoing from previous meetings

CBUG(2013)M001/A002 – *Stagecoach to look into altering Canisbay / Gills service. Ongoing* – Steve had approached Canisbay Community Council but had no response to date. It was agreed that the Chamber would follow up on this.

CBUG(2013)M001/A004 – *Stagecoach and Chamber to liaise with NHS regarding patient transport issues. Ongoing* – Trudy has been in contact with the NHS and the Scottish Patient Transport Service. She has a meeting with the NHS in January to further discuss these issues.

Actions arising from this meeting

CBUG(2014)M001/A001 – *Trudy Morris to talk to Highland Council / DSRL regarding advertising budget*

CBUG(2014)M001/A002 – *Gordon Calder to check possibility of free advertising for the group*

CBUG(2014)M001/A003 – *David Swanson to check and update contact lists for Bus Users Group*

CBUG(2014)M001/A004 – *Steve Walker to confirm Highland Council subsidised routes*

CBUG(2014)M001/A005 – *Steve Walker to talk to NHS about demand for employee transport*

CBUG(2014)M001/A006 – *Steve Walker to monitor passenger numbers on the 82 Thurso-Halkirk-Wick route*

CBUG(2014)M001/A007 – *Steve Walker to add David Swanson to list for bus maintenance / performance statistics*

CBUG(2014)M001/A008 – *Roger Saxon to talk to Highland Council about age profile of buses in Caithness*

CBUG(2014)M001/A009 – *Steve Walker to forward Bus Users Scotland report to David Swanson*

CBUG(2014)M001/A010 – *David Swanson to liaise with Neil Young on issues relating to timetables and bus stops*