

Minutes of the Caithness Bus Users Group

Date: 05.12.14

Time: 2.00pm

Location: Caithness Horizons, Thurso

Present

Trudy Morris	Caithness Chamber of Commerce, CBUG Chairperson
David Swanson	Caithness Chamber of Commerce, Minute Secretary
Stan Towers	Stagecoach
Steve Walker	Stagecoach

In Attendance

A.C. Christie
Anne Watson
Brenda Herrick
Catherine Murray
Eileen Henderson
Elizabeth Cecil
F. Christie
Gail Cecil
Jenny Grant
June Bowes
John Faulds
Kathleen Faulds
Louise Smith
S. Mackay
Zena Sinclair

1. Welcome

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

2. Apologies

Apologies were received from John McLeod and Roger Saxon

3. Minutes of Last Meeting

The minutes of the last meeting (held on 11th June 2014) were approved by all present.

4. Actions

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

Stagecoach paid for an ad in the local paper

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

As M001/A001 above

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

David confirmed that this had been actioned

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

Steve noted that this was still to be completed. Trudy noted that this was likely to be impacted by the Highland Council's proposed budget cuts.

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

Steve confirmed that he would be meeting with Pauline Crow to discuss this issue

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

Steve monitored the passenger numbers for off-peak times on the 82 and 81 routes. There were roughly four times as many travellers on the 82 as the 81.

The feeling was that the number of travellers on the 81 did not warrant increasing the frequency of services.

It was raised that there are issues with the timetables at bus shelters on the 81 route – Steve said this could be taken back to Highland Council, as this is their responsibility.

It was also raised that the 81 does not stop at the dental clinic in Wick – Steve said he would look into this.

CBUG(2014)M002/A001 – *Steve Walker to examine possibility of 81 stopping at dental clinic in Wick*

It was asked whether these numbers differ on Saturdays – Steve said that the numbers were not broken down that far. It was further asked why there is such a big gap in the 81 timetable on Saturdays – Steve agreed to look at this issue

CBUG(2014)M002/A002 – *Steve Walker to look at timetable for 81 on Saturdays*

CBUG(2014)M002/A003 – *David Swanson to feed back to John McLeod about the difference in passenger numbers on the 81 and 82 routes*

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

Steve / David confirmed that this had been actioned

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

It was asked whether there could be a change in timetable for the John O’Groats buses to connect with the service to Dunnet – Steve said he could look at this.

CBUG(2014)M002/A004 – *Steve Walker to look at timetable for John O’Groats and Dunnet buses*

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

David confirmed that this had been actioned

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

David had raised this with Neil – he had sent updated timetables to Stan Towers and had confirmed that the shelter at Upper Burnside was due to be replaced.

It was noted that there is no timetable at the Mount Vernon stop in Thurso – David said he could take this up with Neil.

CBUG(2014)M002/A005 – *David Swanson to take up issue of timetable at Mount Vernon stop with Neil Young*

Steve noted that Highland Council install the bus shelters and display cases and it is their responsibility to ensure timetables are provided.

5. Stagecoach

Steve delivered a brief update from Stagecoach. Of note:

- They have committed to changing the network as infrequently as possible, except where there is direct input from bus users
- There is concern about the likely impact of Highland Council’s budget cuts

6. Bus Service Issues

It was asked whether it would be possible for Wick passengers on the X97 / X99 not to have to change at Dunbeath.

Steve noted that under the current system journey times have improved, buses can meet the ferries at Scrabster and more people are able to access the service.

Steve noted that Stagecoach could look at investing in a facility at Dunbeath for passengers waiting on a connecting bus

CBUG(2014)M002/A006 – *Steve Walker to look at possibility of investment in facility at Dunbeath*

An incident where the X99 failed to leave Wick, leaving passengers stranded for a significant length of time, was raised.

Steve noted that Stagecoach were aware of this and apologised – he noted that the issue was due to a breakdown in internal communications and that this has now been addressed.

It was mentioned that the driver did not seem to know he could phone the depot – Steve noted that he should have known this and will have been reprimanded.

Trudy asked what procedure is in place should this happen in future.

Steve said that the driver will contact the depot, who will contact the driver at Dunbeath and will ensure that a replacement is found as soon as possible.

It was asked how long passengers should wait if a bus does not turn up.

Steve noted that as of April 2015 all buses will be fitted with auto vehicle location, which will enable Stagecoach to create a real-time system, with buses automatically updating the system to let it know their location.

It was queried how this would help passengers waiting at bus stops

Steve noted that passengers with smartphones could check the system. It was raised that many passengers do not have smartphones and that mobile phone signal can be poor – Steve suggested that passengers could check before leaving the house, and that the system would take into account delays with connecting services

It was asked whether RTI screens could be installed at bus stops

Steve noted that these screens cost between £3,000 and £5,000, and that the Council are responsible for making investments in bus stops.

It was agreed that once the system is in place, the Chamber could talk to the Council and see if RTI displays could be put in place for the main bus stops in the area

CBUG(2014)M002/A007 – Chamber to liaise with Highland Council on possibility of funding for RTI displays at bus stops

A further incident with the X97 / 99 was raised, where the X97 was running late and the driver did not phone ahead to confirm with the connecting service.

Stan Towers asked how long ago the incident occurred – it was confirmed that this was some time ago. Stan noted that this issue has now been resolved, and that the new timetables have all the relevant information passengers need to contact the depot.

It was felt that the timetables on the buses are not always up to date.

Stan confirmed that this has been looked into and that all timetables are up to date. He further noted that the timetable has been revamped, with the summer and winter timetables now presented in a single document.

It was noted that the service from the depot is good – the passenger related an incident with the 11:44 Wick Tesco – John O’Groats service where they were kept informed by the depot staff.

It was raised that the seatbelts on the X99 are often not working

Steve noted that the seatbelts are temperamental and can be broken by users. He said that the drivers do a first-use check and will raise an issue if the seatbelts are not in order.

Trudy asked if Steve could look into the issue further – Steve confirmed.

CBUG(2014)M002/A008 – Steve Walker to look into issue with non-working seatbelts on X99

It was raised that a number of issues are linked to the age of the buses – e.g faulty doors / toilets. It was suggested that an improvement in bus stock is needed.

Steve noted that the fleet in the area is largely not old – out of around 31 buses in the area, around 12 are less than three years old and a number of the others are less than eight years old.

He noted that issues with doors not shutting correctly can be due to a failure on the driver’s part – if they pull away before the door is fully closed, this can cause issues. He further noted that the X99 runs coaches, whereas the service operates more like a regular bus service than a coach service, and that this can cause issues, as the coaches are designed for use on services with limited stops. He pointed out that the only solution to this would be to use regular buses on the route.

Steve further explained that the weather in the North of Scotland can often cause difficulty with regards maintenance. For example, during the recent period of very cold weather, they ended up with ice on the brakes, which caused issues. Even when the weather warmed, this still resulted in damage due to corrosion.

It was asked why the Christmas timetable has buses running in Inverness on 26th December and 2nd January, but none to Thurso on these days.

Steve noted that the Inverness service is being trialled as part of a joint effort with Inverness Chamber and Inverness BID. They are running a skeleton service due to demand from business, but that this service loses money.

In response to questions about the possibility of trialling an Inverness – Thurso route on these days, Steve noted that someone would have to underwrite the risk and that a similar Inverness – Aberdeen service loses money.

It was raised that the behaviour of passengers on some services can be a concern, with reference made to a particular individual, and asked what passengers should do about this. It was also asked whether the bus drivers will be supported if they deal with a nuisance passenger.

Steve noted that the procedure is that drivers should pull over and ask the passenger to leave the bus. If they refuse, the driver should call the police. However, he noted that drivers may be unwilling to deal with such passengers due to the possibility of being assaulted and to the disruption likely to be caused (e.g. waiting for over an hour while the police deal with the issue).

It was asked why such passengers cannot be barred from the service in the first place.

Steve noted that it can be hard to anticipate problems, but that if the passenger in question is known to the driver, they would have backing if they refused to allow the passenger on. He further noted that if there is a known issue with a particular passenger, Stagecoach can write to them and inform them that they will not be allowed to use the services.

It was agreed that if the address of the individual in question was given to the depot, Stagecoach could do this.

CBUG(2014)M002/A009 – *Stagecoach to write letter to known nuisance passenger once address provided*

A further issue was raised with passengers not using seatbelts on services, and that the Citylink Gold service enforces this

Steve noted that they cannot enforce this and that their services are different to the Citylink / Megabus Gold – these services have only one or two stops and therefore all passengers can be made to fasten their belts at the start.

A note of thanks was made regarding the installation of new bus stops in Castletown. It was also raised that there is an issue with the timing of connections between the 81 and the X99

Steve noted that he is not sure why the timing point changed and that he will look at getting it changed.

CBUG(2014)M002/A010 – *Steve Walker to look at changing timing point for 81 service*

It was asked whether the group could express its displeasure over continued lengthy delays on the A9 due to the police shutting the road for long periods following accidents.

Trudy noted that the Chamber would take this up.

CBUG(2014)M002/A011 – Chamber to liaise with Police Scotland on delays due to accidents

It was raised that there can be issues with passengers for Dornoch booking on the X99, preventing passengers for Scrabster who have not booked from travelling

Steve noted that they have added a 65-seater on the route for certain journeys which are known to be in high demand, and that passengers for Dornoch are encouraged to book to help manage demand during the afternoon peak. He further noted that Stagecoach will attempt to assist with ferry connections, even where passengers have not booked.

It was raised that the 12.30 X99 from Inverness – Thurso is often missed when attempting to connect from the Glasgow – Inverness service.

Steve noted that the service used to run at 12.40 but this has been changed as it must be in Thurso by 15.20 to run as a school bus. He further noted that the usage of buses has to be maximised, and that the school runs cover the cost of other services.

It was raised that the final town service in Thurso runs at 14.35 and asked if it could run later

Steve said that he would look at this, but noted that when a similar service was requested in Wick, the service was run until 16.30 but saw very little usage. He further noted that both the Thurso and Wick town services lose money.

Steve felt it may be possible to look at running this service later on Saturdays.

CBUG(2014)M002/A012 – Steve Walker to look at possibility of running Thurso town service later on Saturdays

It was asked whether Stagecoach could survey usage on the Wick – John O’Groats services, as it was felt that there are many buses and few passengers.

Steve noted that the buses are not well-used but that there are complaints if they do not run. He further noted that there is a balance between the needs of users and the budget for services, but that they will only cut the network if forced to.

It was noted that there is a danger due to parked cars at the chosen stops on the John O’Groats – Thurso route (Skinandis and Precision Blinds). It was asked whether the service could instead stop at Santander.

Steve said he was sure that they had been asked to run the service with those stops, but that he would look at changing this. He noted that cars should not be parked in bus stops.

CBUG(2014)M002/A013 – Steve Walker to look at possibility of changing stops on John O’Groats – Thurso service

It was raised that the ramps on buses are not always in good order and asked how often they are checked.

Steve confirmed that they are checked every 21 days

An issue was raised regarding the air conditioning on the X99, which led to a cold journey.

Steve noted that if there is a fault with the heating system, drivers will report this.

There was a general statement of praise made for the drivers.

It was asked if Stagecoach can guarantee the issue with the X99 will not recur.

Stan Towers said he could guarantee this and that lessons were learned from the incident in question.

Steve noted that Wick is a parking site, not a manned depot.

It was reiterated that the issue was one of internal communications, and that this has since been resolved.

It was asked whether the bus windows could be cleaned more often.

Steve noted that there should be less issues with this now that the new depot is operational. He further noted that winter can cause problems here, as the windows freeze over after washing.

7. Any Other Business

CBUG(2014)M002/A014 – *David Swanson to get contacts for community councils and add to mailing list*

CBUG(2014)M002/A015 – *David Swanson to raise issue of outdated timetable at Thurso Santander stop with Highland Council*

8. Date of Next Meeting

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

Trudy Morris thanked all for attending and closed the meeting.

Actions ongoing from previous meetings

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

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

Actions arising from this meeting

CBUG(2014)M002/A001 – Steve Walker to examine possibility of 81 stopping at dental clinic in Wick

CBUG(2014)M002/A002 – Steve Walker to look at timetable for 81 on Saturdays

CBUG(2014)M002/A003 – David Swanson to feed back to John McLeod about the difference in passenger numbers on the 81 and 82 routes

CBUG(2014)M002/A004 – Steve Walker to look at timetable for John O’Groats and Dunnet buses

CBUG(2014)M002/A005 – David Swanson to take up issue of timetable at Mount Vernon stop with Neil Young

CBUG(2014)M002/A006 – Steve Walker to look at possibility of investment in facility at Dunbeath

CBUG(2014)M002/A007 – Chamber to liaise with Highland Council on possibility of funding for RTI displays at bus stops

CBUG(2014)M002/A008 – Steve Walker to look into issue with non-working seatbelts on X99

CBUG(2014)M002/A009 – Stagecoach to write letter to known nuisance passenger once address provided

CBUG(2014)M002/A010 – Steve Walker to look at changing timing point for 81 service

CBUG(2014)M002/A011 – Chamber to liaise with Police Scotland on delays due to accidents

CBUG(2014)M002/A012 – Steve Walker to look at possibility of running Thurso town service later on Saturdays

CBUG(2014)M002/A013 – Steve Walker to look at possibility of changing stops on John O’Groats – Thurso service

CBUG(2014)M002/A014 – David Swanson to get contacts for community councils and add to mailing list

CBUG(2014)M002/A015 – David Swanson to raise issue of outdated timetable at Thurso Santander stop with Highland Council