

# Minutes of the Caithness Bus Users Group

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**Date:** 04.03.2016

**Time:** 2.30pm

**Location:** Norseman Hotel, Wick

## Present

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

## In Attendance

A. Atkins  
Aimee Marks  
Ann Marks  
Brenda Herrick (Castletown & District Community Council)  
Bruce Simpson  
Don Smith (Thurso Community Council)  
Helen Smith  
James Smith  
Janet MacLennan  
John McLeod  
Joyce MacDonald  
L. Gunn  
L. Torley  
Lindsay Henderson (North Highland College UHI)  
Marion Sutherland  
Mary Gordon  
P. Mowat  
R. Florence  
Rhona Houston  
Ryan Gow  
Shelley Davis  
Tom Meikle (Dunnet & Canisbay Community Council)  
Mrs V. A. McWilliams  
Virginia Miller  
W. Mowat  
Willie Mackay (Highland Council)

## 1. Welcome

The Chairperson, Trudy Morris, welcomed everyone, explained the purpose of the Caithness Bus Users Group and the structure of the meeting, and introduced all representatives present.

## 2. Apologies

Apologies were received from:

Alan Tubbs  
Annette Mackay  
Cathy Csorogi  
Christine Dodds (Highland Council)  
Gail Cecil  
Gail Ross (Highland Council)  
Janette Mowat  
Liz Geddes (Castletown & District Community Council)  
Louise Smith  
Inspector Nicholas Clasper (Police Scotland)  
Zena Sinclair

## 3. Matters Arising

There were no matters arising.

## 4. Minutes of Last Meeting

There being no changes or amendments, the minutes were approved as a true and accurate record of the last meeting (held on 4<sup>th</sup> September 2015).

## 5. Actions

**CBUG(2015)M002/A001** – Chamber to liaise with Police Scotland on issues raised with road closures  
**Ongoing**

Trudy explained that this related to the length of road closures following accidents - it was hoped that Inspector Clasper could give an update on this.

**CBUG(2015)M002/A002** – Chamber to write to Highland Council with regards to process for timetable renewals. **Ongoing**

Trudy Morris explained that due to recent changes in Highland Council, confirmation was required on who was dealing with this. This would be followed up on once confirmation received.

**CBUG(2015)M002/A003 – Chamber to clear up confusion over Stroma Rd. stop with Highland Council. Ongoing**

As with A002 above

**CBUG(2015)M002/A004 – Chamber to feed back issues with parking in Thurso to Police Scotland. Complete**

Trudy noted that this had been superseded - Highland Council have confirmed that they will have parking wardens in the area. Don Smith confirmed that Thurso Community Council had discussed this with Police Scotland.

It was noted that the wardens would be based in Inverness and would cover the area. Trudy noted that a Council enforcement officer had been targeting those parking in disabled areas and asking them to move on.

**CBUG(2015)M002/A005 – Steve Walker to look at adding renewal date to all timetables, regardless of changes. Complete**

Steve had noted that timetables do have commencing dates, but that it is not easy to predict when changes will happen. If a closing date were to be added then it could cause confusion if a change was necessary prior to that. It would also result in additional expense in terms of disposing of timetables which have had no changes.

Steve further noted that it could result in concerns that services will end or change following the renewal date. He explained that they are encouraging people to either ring the depot to check if timetables are the latest version or asking people to check the website for the most up-to-date timetable.

**CBUG(2015)M002/A006 – Steve Walker to take up issues with display board at Inverness Bus Station with HITRANS. Complete**

This has been done and the displays at Inverness Bus Station should now be correct.

**CBUG(2015)M002/A007 – Steve Walker to raise awareness with drivers of passengers with speech issues. Complete**

This has been completed - drivers have been made aware that they should give people with speech impediments more time.

**CBUG(2015)M002/A008 – Chamber to take up issues with capacity at Inverness Bus Station through Caithness Transport Forum. Complete**

This has been done - the issue has been taken up through HITRANS. They are not aware of any plans to expand the bus station but do know that the Council have explored the potential of opening up an alternative access to the station. This is only likely to go ahead if a private developer takes forward plans for a new development at this location.

HITRANS have met with Stagecoach and Highland Council to look at options to reduce rat-running through the station. Steve noted that this is tied in with the decriminalisation of parking and that there are plans to restrict car access to that area.

**CBUG(2015)M002/A009** – Chamber to take up cancellation of late night 82 service with Highland Council. **Complete**

This has been done - the service is still listed on the most recent timetable and this is no longer an issue. David Swanson noted that he had checked the timetable a couple of days ago and this service was still listed.

It was raised that this was with regards to a late night Sunday service on the 81 route - Steve noted that this is tied in to the late X99 service and that this has only run through the summer.

**CBUG(2015)M002/A010** – Steve Walker to raise awareness with drivers of stopping at new shelter in Thurso. **Complete**

This has been done - drivers have been made aware of this stopping point.

## 6. Stagecoach

Steve delivered an update from Stagecoach. Of note:

- They are looking at reinstating a service to Durran, following an issue raised by a bus user
- There are issues in Thurso with the town service accessing some streets due to parked cars. They have started consultation with the Council to remove the service from Pennyland Drive as buses are being made to drive unsafely and cars are parked illegally. This has been raised by residents that there are safety concerns due to buses having to bump up onto kerbs.

Trudy asked if this was the service running from Ormlie to the town - Steve confirmed this.

Trudy asked what the Council have said with regards to this - Steve noted that there has been little feedback from the Council at present, but that he is hopeful there will be a resolution to this issue.

Trudy noted that the Chamber would take an action to write to the Council regarding this service, noting that the service should be retained but that there are safety concerns. Steve noted that one suggestion was to ask the drivers to move their cars, but that this was not a realistic option.

**CBUG(2016)M001/A001** - Chamber to write to Council regarding Thurso town service

Trudy asked if Willie Mackay could also raise this issue - Willie confirmed he would take this back to the Council.

Steve continued with his update:

- Stagecoach are looking at options to add more journeys to Brora and Golspie using the 25X service. This may have some impacts on the X99, but should not change the number of journeys or affect timings particularly heavily.

Trudy asked for clarification on this - Steve noted this is a paper exercise at the moment, but they are looking at whether the 25X can be a more direct service. If it is decided to change the service, this will be done with full consultation.

It was asked whether this would result in less buses running to Caithness - Steve confirmed this is not the case.

Steve noted that his remit covered as far as Aberdeen, which has over the last 18 months seen passenger numbers drop due to economic conditions in the area. They are looking at areas where they can cut costs, but are also looking at areas with potential for growth, and that these include the Golspie / Brora area.

Steve noted that the next big impact on the area would be the renewal of contracted services in the area in January 2017, the tenders for which are now available. Once all bids are in, the Council will look at what services will be changed or cut - the Council are looking to make a 16% cost saving in the area.

## **7. Bus Service Issues**

It was asked why the 16:40 X99 service from Inverness was cut.

Steve noted that this was a result of the consultation carried out in the area when changes were being made to the X99 service. It had been proposed that the 17:40 service should stop at Brora - following discussion and a survey of users in the area. The majority of respondents felt that the 17:40 service should be kept.

It was asked how many people replied to the survey

David Swanson noted that he didn't have the exact number to hand, but that it was slightly less than 300 people and that around 75% of those felt the 17:40 should be retained.

Some concern was raised that the number of respondents was small, and it was asked how the survey was circulated - Steve noted that it is fairly representative of the users of the route, and Trudy noted that it was reported in the press. It was explained that the survey was all done online, but that there was a lot of press coverage of it.

Steve noted that this came at the same time as the proposed changes to the 76 service.

It was raised that the information regarding which bus is at which stance at Inverness bus station is inaccurate

An issue was also raised regarding late-running services and physical condition of the buses, including one driver who was told to continue with a bus in visibly poor condition and one journey where the door mechanism / wheelchair lift were in poor condition.

Finally, it was raised that on a recent journey, all passengers got off the X99 and on to the X97

Steve noted that they are aware of capacity issues on the 17:45 X99 service, and that a bigger bus has been added to this route as a result. He noted that this is another reason they are looking at options to improve the offering between Inverness and Sutherland.

With regards to reliability, Steve noted that this does suffer in the winter months due to weather-related issues. He noted that they are close to replacing some vehicles in the area with newer vehicles. There was some discussion around new vehicles in the Aberdeen area.

An issue was raised regarding the X99 to X97 being a connecting service, and that this used to be a continuous service

Steve noted that the X99 was changed five years ago to a through service from Scrabster and that a commitment has been given that the connecting bus will always wait at Dunbeath. He noted that some of the coaches on the X97 are those which may be upgraded, and that some of the older vehicles have already been replaced.

An issue was raised regarding the journey from Dundee-Wick, and that there is just a 10 minute window in Inverness to catch the 12:30. It was noted that, due to issues with the booking system, the only solution is to book for the following bus

Steve noted that Stagecoach can speak to Citylink and have the booking system amended. There was some further discussion of this and it was agreed that the issue would be addressed.

It was raised that some of the Castletown services stop at certain stops but not at others, particularly with regards to school buses

Steve noted that with the number of school and college kids, they try to make sure there is enough space on each bus, so certain buses pick up at certain stops to ensure that everybody is able to get on to the service.

It was asked if it would be possible to get timetables in all stops

Steve noted that they are trying and are liaising with Highland Council on this. He noted that there are certain display cases they can't get into and that they are speaking to the Council about this. He further noted that a survey of all timetables across Caithness has been carried out and this list given to the Council.

Trudy noted that this is an ongoing issue and that Stagecoach, Highland Council and HITRANS were going to meet to discuss this. Steve noted that they are looking at a similar model to Aberdeenshire, where all partners fund a position with responsibility for all timetables across the region. At this stage, there is no timescale for when this will be in place.

Trudy noted that the Chamber would write to HITRANS on this.

**CBUG(2016)M002/A002** - Chamber to write to HITRANS regarding timescales for dealing with timetabling issues.

Trudy noted that the Council had indicated that they will deal with issues with timetables only if these are directly raised with them.

Brenda Herrick noted that Castletown & District Community Council had raised this with the Council, and that they were being sent a tool to allow them access to display cases.

Steve noted that it may be impossible to get into the cases due to the rust and that these need to be replaced.

Trudy asked if Willie Mackay could raise this issue as well.

An issue was raised with reliability on the Gills Bay-Inverness service and that passengers were not picked up by the X99

Steve noted that he would look into this.

**CBUG(2016)M002/A003** - *Steve Walker to look into issues with Gills Bay-Inverness service*

It was asked whether the 13:15 service at Gills Bay would be reinstated.

Steve noted that they are not proposing to do this. He noted that there is an issue with Gills Bay in that there is a switch from 3 to 4 journeys partway through the summer, and that the numbers on the 13:15 were very low. He noted that they will link the Scrabster service with the train station to ensure there is a connection there.

It was asked whether Stagecoach also operate the Orkney service from St. Margaret's Hope, and noted that the buses and ferries do not seem to link up there

Steve noted that Stagecoach do operate this service and that on some occasions where the boat is late, they cannot wait as they have commitments to operate school services.

It was asked whether there was any plan to operate a through service to the islands

Steve noted that they do link up where possible, but that where the bus has to wait for the ferry, this causes issues further down the line, as passengers will not be aware of why the bus is running late. They used to have a lot of complaints regarding the Ullapool-Inverness service, as locals could not rely on the bus.

Don Smith raised a further issue with timetables, and that Thurso Community Council have been in discussions with Highland Council about this.

Steve noted that he would ask his Operations Manager to make contact with Thurso Community Council and prove that it is impossible to access some of the timetable cases.

Trudy asked if Don was speaking to Ivor Souter on this - Don confirmed this.

Steve noted that this was why the Aberdeenshire model is being looked at.

Don noted that a number of issues had been raised with the Community Council - it was confirmed that these would be passed on to Steve for action.

Trudy noted that the Chamber would ask for somebody from William Gilfillan's team to come up and meet with Thurso Community Council regarding these issues.

**CBUG(2016)M002/A004** - Chamber to write to William Gilfillan regarding issues with timetabling and ask for meeting with Thurso Community Council

It was asked what was happening with regards to RTI displays

Trudy noted that this was with HITRANS - Steve confirmed that this was imminent and that he would speak to HITRANS about this.

An issue was raised with regards to being unable to use Caithness Megarider tickets and smartcards on the Dounreay works services

Steve noted that this was something that Stagecoach would discuss with Dounreay and that they would try to find a way to enable this. He noted that all the revenue raised on these contracts is handed back to Dounreay and that they would try to find a model for this which works with Megarider tickets and smartcards.

**CBUG(2016)M002/A005** - Steve Walker to discuss issues with smartcards / Megarider tickets with Dounreay

An issue was raised regarding the condition of the buses, in particular with regards to heating

Steve noted that Stagecoach are currently working through issues with reliability. He noted that the new buses brought in four years ago are all getting old at the same time, and that they are dealing with issues on these buses.

An issue was raised regarding passengers with physical disabilities changing at Dunbeath and whether a through Inverness-Wick service would be considered

Steve noted that he could not commit to this, but that if anything materialises out of the 25X work mentioned earlier, they may look at a journey running direct to Wick.

It was asked why the connecting service started in the first place

Steve noted that there was potential to grow the Thurso market and the link to the Scrabster ferry, but that if this has changed they may look at switching this back to Wick and run a connecting service to Thurso. He noted that due to the structure of the route, one set of passengers will always have to connect.

An issue was raised with regards to the Durran bus and it was felt that the local team are not aware of the local area

Steve noted that efforts are being made to grow local people into management roles - he noted that it can take a long time for those new to the area to get to know it. He noted that they are currently putting a local person through the management training programme, and that he understands the importance of growing talent in local communities.

With regards to the 83 service, it was asked whether the 81 service could divert a couple of days a week to service Durran

Steve noted that he will look at solutions for this, but that they will have to look at the effects on other bus users.

It was noted that a number of the drivers are very helpful with regards to timetables.

Steve noted that a lot of drivers are local people and are part of the community.

Brenda asked what impact the retendering of school contracts might have on local services

Steve noted that if Stagecoach have the resource in their fleet, they will try to build a local network. If they lost a number of school contracts, he has doubts that other operators would try to do the same.

## **8. Any Other Business**

No other business was raised.

## **9. Date of Next Meeting**

The next meeting of the Caithness Bus Users Group was agreed to be held in Thurso – date and venue to be confirmed

Trudy noted that if any issues need to be raised in the interim, bus users can phone or email the Chamber or go direct to Stagecoach.

Trudy Morris thanked all for attending and closed the meeting.

## **Actions ongoing from previous meetings**

**CBUG(2015)M002/A001** – Chamber to liaise with Police Scotland on issues raised with road closures

**CBUG(2015)M002/A002** – Chamber to write to Highland Council with regards to process for timetable renewals.

**CBUG(2015)M002/A003** – Chamber to clear up confusion over Stroma Rd. stop with Highland Council.

## **Actions arising from this meeting**

**CBUG(2016)M001/A001** - Chamber to write to Council regarding Thurso town service

**CBUG(2016)M002/A002** - Chamber to write to HITRANS regarding timescales for dealing with timetabling issues.

**CBUG(2016)M002/A003** - Steve Walker to look into issues with Gills Bay-Inverness service

**CBUG(2016)M002/A004** - Chamber to write to William Gilfillan regarding issues with timetabling and ask for meeting with Thurso Community Council

**CBUG(2016)M002/A005** - Steve Walker to discuss issues with smartcards / Megarider tickets with Dounreay

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