

# Minutes of public meeting to discuss bus services

## Norseman Hotel, Wick – 24<sup>th</sup> November 2016

### Present

Trudy Morris	Caithness Chamber of Commerce (Chair)
David Swanson	Caithness Chamber of Commerce (Minute Secretary)
David Summers	Highland Council
Mark Whitelocks	Managing Director, Stagecoach North Scotland
William Mainus	Commercial Manager, Stagecoach North Scotland

### Apologies

Coreen Campbell	Caithness Rural Transport
Brenda Herrick	Castletown & District Community Council
Liz Geddes	Castletown & District Community Council
Cllr Roger Saxon	Highland Council
Inspector Nicholas Clasper	Police Scotland
Jan Banks	Wick Community Council
Ann Marks	Bus User
Janet Mowat	Bus User
John Faulds	Bus User
Olive Whittlesea	Bus User
Mrs V A McWilliams	Bus User

### 1) Open and Introductions

Trudy Morris opened the meeting, explaining that the Chamber had been asked to facilitate this meeting to allow bus users to give feedback on Stagecoach's proposed changes to bus services in the area.

Trudy introduced David Summers from Highland Council, and Mark Whitelocks and William Mainus from Stagecoach. She asked if they could each give a brief introduction before opening to questions from the floor.

### 2) David Summers – Highland Council

David Summers explained the background to the proposed service changes, which have partly resulted from Stagecoach losing a number of Highland Council contracts in a recent retendering exercise.

He explained that the Council has contracts for school transport and public transport, and that operators can also run commercial services with no Council involvement. Where there are gaps in the provision of commercial services, the Council can make a decision on how to fill these with contracted services.

He noted that the X99 / X97 and some of the other services in Caithness are commercial, but that a number of them are public services, and that Stagecoach have traditionally filled other services off the back of Council contracts for school and public services.

David explained that the Council has had to cut the budget for school and public transport by 15%, and that they have been trying to protect public services by saving money on school contracts, which they have an obligation to run.

He noted that to date they have awarded 33 contracts in the area and that the public contracts are yet to be awarded – the Highland Council Community Services Committee is meeting on 7 December to discuss this.

He emphasised that Stagecoach are in an interim stage at the moment until all contracts have been awarded.

### **3) Mark Whitelocks – Stagecoach**

Mark Whitelocks gave a brief update on behalf of Stagecoach. He noted that, as stated by David, Stagecoach have lost a number of school contracts, and that they would usually use the vehicles for school services to run commercial services throughout the day.

He noted that Stagecoach had received a lot of feedback on the proposed changes, through their website and also via David Swanson at the Chamber. He felt this feedback had been useful and explained that they are looking to make changes to a number of services as a result.

With regards to the change to the X99 service to run via Castletown and Wick, rather than Halkirk, he noted that they have discussed this based on feedback and are looking at whether it is possible to run the first bus of the day via Halkirk.

### **4) Questions / Feedback from Bus Users**

It was felt that the changes to the X99 have been used to fill in other services in the Castletown-Bower area which have been cut, and noted that it is important for people to get to and from work, not just to Inverness and back. It was mentioned that the 177 service has been cut.

Mark Whitelocks explained that this is an extra service and they are not looking to take any services away.

With regards to the 177, David Summers noted that this has been awarded to another operator and that he would speak to this operator and see if they would run it as a public service.

**ACTION 1:** *David Summers to speak to new operator of 177 service to see if it can be run as a public service*

It was raised that the X99 has dropped from five services per day to three per day and the timetable extended by half an hour. It was also noted that the latest southbound bus is now at 10:50.

William Mainus noted that one of the five services referred to is summer only, and that it has not yet been decided what to do about this. He explained that this will be decided by Easter 2017.

William further noted that with regards to the 10:50, he is happy to look at timings for this up to a potential latest departure of 11:30.

**ACTION 2:** *William Mainus to look at timing of 10:50 X99 to see if it can be moved later*

The importance of a service down the Causewaymire was raised.

William Mainus noted that as above, they are looking to see if one X99 service per day can be run on the previous route. He also noted that they would see if they can provide a connecting service in the morning and evening.

**ACTION 3:** *William Mainus to look at possibility of connecting service down Causewaymire to meet X99*

There was some discussion of the summer service on the X99 and the usage of this.

Trudy Morris asked when Stagecoach could come back on changes discussed. Mark noted that they would put the information online and send to the Chamber, community councils, etc. for circulation as soon as it was available.

**ACTION 4:** *Mark Whitelocks to send information on service changes to Chamber for circulation as soon as available*

A point was raised with regards to the use of concessionary cards for free travel – it was felt that card holders deserve a decent public service.

David Summers noted that Scottish Government reimburses bus operators for travel by concessionary card holders, at a rate of 56.9% of the adult single fare.

Mark Whitelocks emphasised that the concessionary fare is a reimbursement to the operator, not a subsidy from Scottish Government.

With regards to school services open to the public, it was asked how much of the revenue for this journey comes from Highland Council.

David Summers noted that if a service is open to the public, the route operator as part of their bid has to estimate the amount they will receive from commercial fares and concessionary card use. The remainder comes from Highland Council.

Bill Mowat, representing Gills Harbour, raised a concern with the proposed reduction in service from Gills, noting that the service has dropped from three direct buses to Inverness per day to zero.

William Mainus noted that a colleague of his was looking at this – there is an issue trying to make all the connections work, but they looking to put in at least one trip per day.

**ACTION 5:** *William Mainus to look at one trip per day from Gills Harbour to Inverness*

It was raised that there are lots of issues with breakdowns and missed connections, and that a key issue here is that the buses used are too big for the routes. It was also felt that school children often leave the early morning buses in a mess, and that someone from the schools should check this and reprimand the children responsible.

Mark Whitelocks noted that the size of the vehicles used is based on the busiest journey during the day – as discussed earlier, the same vehicles are used to run multiple routes.

It was asked whether there was room for the Council to specify services with smaller buses.

David Summers noted that it is generally more economical to run large buses all day, but that they have tried to link public services to small primary school contracts rather than secondary school ones.

He noted that they had tried this on the Thurso – John O’Groats service but that nobody tendered for this.

It was raised that there may be environmental concerns.

Mark Whitelocks noted that Stagecoach have customers other than the Council, including Dounreay, and that the size of buses used are to fit the needs of these contracts.

With regards to breakdowns, he noted that they are committed to maintenance and review breakdowns every four weeks to analyse what went wrong and try to address it. He noted that it can be hard to get parts up to the area.

It was asked what services would be available between Wick and Dunbeath

Mark Whitelocks noted that a number of short journeys would run on this route, in addition to the main X99 service to Inverness.

Councillor Matthew Reiss thanked the Chamber for organising the meeting and raised a number of points, as follows:

- In south-west Scotland, the coaches used are often newer
- With regards to connecting services to Orkney via Gills and Scrabster, and with regards to summer services, it is important to consider tourism as well as local travel
- He has been contacted by two constituents in Halkirk and Glengolly with regards to the changes to the X99
- It is impossible for drivers to intervene when schoolchildren are misbehaving, but there have been instances where police have been called to intervene
- With regards to Council budgets and the impacts on transport, Council Tax forms around 16% of the budget and this has been frozen for a number of years; the Council is undertaking 120 reviews of different areas of work to look for savings; dozens of managerial posts have been lost, but the level of cuts the Council is experiencing is making things very hard
- The services in Caithness are lifeline services – Councillor Reiss urged Stagecoach and the Council to think about the remotest areas of the Highlands

It was raised that it may be more cost-effective to run new buses than continue to repair old ones, and that impacts on jobs in the area need to be considered when looking at service cuts

Mark Whitelocks noted that it costs money to run services and that there need to be the passenger numbers to justify this.

It was noted that the number of services on the 81 has increased, and that it leaves Thurso at more or less the same time as the 82

William Mainus noted that he would look at the timings of these services.

**ACTION 6:** *William Mainus to look at timings of 81 / 82 services*

It was asked whether there will be fare increases in the coming year

Mark Whitelocks noted that they had frozen the cost of the Megarider ticket this year, but that if costs increase they will need to review this.

It was raised that it can be hard to contact the depot early in the morning

Mark Whitelocks noted that they do try to keep the depot staffed, but sometimes have to send staff out to run buses.

Councillor Donnie Mackay raised the age profile of the buses in Caithness

Mark noted that the average age of the fleet in Caithness is 8 years old, and that there can be complex issues with new buses requiring diagnostics.

It was asked what had happened with the 76 service

Mark Whitelocks noted that they had to replace some local services such as the 76 with buses on other routes

Various issues were raised with regards to accessibility and the desirability of low floor buses

William Mainus noted that they would generally prefer to run low floor buses, but that the size of vehicle tends to be dictated by the contract – he noted that the Dounreay contract requires coaches.

It was agreed that the Chamber would take this matter up with Dounreay.

**ACTION 7:** *Chamber to discuss specification of buses in contracts with Dounreay with regards to accessibility concerns*

There was some further discussion of accessibility with regards to the X99 service and it was raised that passengers with mobility issues have to book the use of the ramp.

Mark Whitelocks noted that passengers can book this in advance but that there is no requirement to do so.

It was asked whether the 83 service to Durran would stay on

William Mainus noted that it would not.

David Summers noted that he would speak to the other operators and see if one of them could run the service.

**ACTION 8:** *David Summers to speak to other bus operators with regards to running 83 service to Durran*

It was raised that there would be merit in better connection between rail and bus to provide one efficient service north of Golspie.

There was some discussion of competition concerns around this – Trudy noted that the Chamber would take this up with Gail Ross MSP

**ACTION 9:** *Chamber to discuss connection between bus and rail services with Gail Ross MSP*

Councillor Neil MacDonald noted that legislation requires accessible buses to be in place by 2017.

Mark Whitelocks noted that this is the case for buses, and that coaches will need to be accessible by 2020.

Councillor MacDonald noted his concerns with the lack of consultation.

William Mainus noted that they would usually consult sooner but that the tender process has been complicated. With regards to the X99, he noted he will look at the timings / routes for this, but that he only has three return services a day to offer.

With regards to the 76 service, it was felt that the timings for the replacements with the 77 and 81 are not in line with when most people want to use it

William Mainus noted he would look at this.

**ACTION 10:** *William Mainus to look at timings of 76 replacement services*

It was raised that the new timings for the X99 mean those travelling from Halkirk for medical appointments don't get home until 10:30pm

William Mainus noted that, as above, they would look at providing a service via Halkirk

An issue was raised with users trying to connect to northbound services from the G10 Glasgow-Inverness service.

William Mainus noted that they had moved a northbound X99 service to 12:40 to enable this connection to be made

It was asked whether NHS Highland had been engaged with, given that appointments at Raigmore are a key issue

There was some discussion of this and it was agreed that the Chamber would hold a meeting with Stagecoach, Highland Council, other bus operators and NHS Highland to discuss services in the area.

**ACTION 11:** *Chamber to meet with Council, bus operators and NHS Highland to discuss bus services in Caithness*

It was raised that under the new timetable, services from Thurso-John O'Groats-Wick are separated and there is now a wait of nearly 2 hours at John O'Groats.

William Mainus clarified that this was the service that used to be the 77 / 80 and agreed that he would look at this.

**ACTION 12:** *William Mainus to look at timetabling issue with Thurso-John O'Groats-Wick service*

It was raised that the last service to John O'Groats is now at 7:00pm and does not go through Scarfskerry, leaving passengers with a two mile walk.

William Mainus agree to look at this

**ACTION 13:** *William Mainus to look at service to Scarfskerry*

It was raised that many of the school contracts lost by Stagecoach were also used by the public and asked why this was not considered as part of the tendering process?

David Summers noted that the Council do invite tenders for public use where they are aware of this, and that some have had no successful tenders.

There was some further discussion of this matter, and it was agreed that the issue of public use of school services would be discussed at the meeting discussed in **Action 11** above

## **5) Summing Up and Close**

Mark Whitelocks and David Summers gave a brief summation each of the actions they had taken away.

David Summers noted that the existing public service contracts will run until Easter 2017, and that he could not yet give a list of who has won the contracts.

Trudy Morris asked Stagecoach to give details of new timetables as soon as available, and suggested that they also put something out to the local press.

**ACTION 14:** *Stagecoach to provide details on new timetables for circulation*

**ACTION 15:** *Stagecoach to provide information on new timetables to local press for wider circulation*

Trudy Morris thanked all for attending and closed the meeting.

## **6) List of actions**

**ACTION 1:** *David Summers to speak to new operator of 177 service to see if it can be run as a public service*

**ACTION 2:** *William Mainus to look at timing of 10:50 X99 to see if it can be moved later*

**ACTION 3:** *William Mainus to look at possibility of connecting service down Causewaymire to meet X99*

**ACTION 4:** *Mark Whitelocks to send information on service changes to Chamber for circulation as soon as available*

**ACTION 5:** *William Mainus to look at one trip per day from Gills Harbour to Inverness*

**ACTION 6:** *William Mainus to look at timings of 81 / 82 services*

**ACTION 7:** *Chamber to discuss specification of buses in contracts with Dounreay with regards to accessibility concerns*

**ACTION 8:** *David Summers to speak to other bus operators with regards to running 83 service to Durran*

**ACTION 9:** *Chamber to discuss connection between bus and rail services with Gail Ross MSP*

**ACTION 10:** *William Mainus to look at timings of 76 replacement services*

**ACTION 11:** *Chamber to meet with Council, bus operators and NHS Highland to discuss bus services in Caithness*

**ACTION 12:** *William Mainus to look at timetabling issue with Thurso-John O'Groats-Wick service*

**ACTION 13:** *William Mainus to look at service to Scarferry*

**ACTION 14:** *Stagecoach to provide details on new timetables for circulation*

**ACTION 15:** *Stagecoach to provide information on new timetables to local press for wider circulation*

## **7) List of actions from meeting on 2016-11-10**

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

**CBUG(2016)M001/A002** - Chamber to write to HITRANS regarding timescales for dealing with timetabling issues.

**CBUG(2016)M001/A004** - Chamber to write to William Gilfillan regarding issues with timetabling and ask for meeting with Thurso Community Council.

**CBUG(2016)M002/A001** – Mark Whitelocks to look at size of bus used for Thurso town service route

**CBUG(2016)M002/A002** – Chamber to discuss proposed Stagecoach changes with Highland Council

**CBUG(2016)M002/A003** – Chamber to arrange public meeting with Stagecoach and Highland Council

**CBUG(2016)M002/A004** – Mark Whitelocks to clarify timings on new X99 route

**CBUG(2016)M002/A005** – Chamber to take up issues with RTI displays with HITRANS

**CBUG(2016)M002/A006** – Mark Whitelocks to provide statistics on breakdowns

**CBUG(2016)M002/A007** – Chamber to look in to link between Castletown bus and Thurso train