

Minutes of the Caithness Bus Users Group

Date: 07.06.2013

Time: 2.00pm

Location: Norseman Hotel, Wick

Present

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

In Attendance

Debbie Aitkenhead	Liz Jones
Sharon Barclay	A. Tubb
Alastair Ferrier	Coreen Campbell
Colin Mackintosh	Wilma Thacker
M. R. Blacklock	John McLeod
P. J. Cundall	Brenda Payne
Elma Budge	

1. Welcome

The Chairperson, Trudy Morris, welcomed all and explained that the Caithness Bus Users Group (CBUG), as a sub-group of Caithness Transport Forum, is now being facilitated by Caithness Chamber of Commerce, which took over from Caithness Partnership at the beginning of 2013. She explained that the Chamber's role is purely to facilitate the meeting and that the purpose of the meeting is to raise and discuss bus service issues for Caithness.

It was explained that while the CBUG is supposed to run every six months, due to the changeover in facilitation the last meeting was held in February 2012.

Trudy introduced the representatives from the Chamber and Stagecoach.

2. Apologies

Peter Body

3. Minutes of Last Meeting

Trudy explained that as none of those at the last meeting were present today, the meeting would move on to the matters arising.

4. Matters Arising

1) *Koreen MacDougall, Caithness Partnership to ask if Highland Council would be willing to display the Stagecoach timetables in bus stops – ONGOING.* It was confirmed that this was still an issue and the action would be taken forward.

- A further issue with bus timetables was raised at this point by a gentleman from Sutherland. It was noted that in February, when Highland Council updated the timetables in bus stops, some services were omitted from the timetables. This was raised with both Stagecoach and Highland Council but no action was taken. He wished to note that there are issues with timetables along the whole X99 route.

Steve Walker confirmed that these displays are the responsibility of Highland Council and that this will be followed up with them. The gentleman reiterated that he has followed this up with Highland Council previously.

CBUG(2013)M001/A001 – Stagecoach and Chamber to follow up with Highland Council on issues with timetables in Caithness and Sutherland.

2) *Steve Walker, Stagecoach to look at available resources to extend the bus service at Wick beyond 3pm* – It was noted that this issue was one of the major points of discussion for the meeting and that this would be discussed later.

3) *Steve Walker, Stagecoach to look into whether any direct service option through Dunbeath could be implemented* – **COMPLETE.** Steve Walker confirmed that there would be no change to the X97 / X99 service.

4) *Steve Walker, Stagecoach to look into possibility for buses to park on the other side of the road at Wick Rail Station* – **COMPLETE.** Steve Walker confirmed that this was not possible due to road layout.

5) *Koreen MacDougall, Caithness Partnership agreed to submit a press release to raise awareness of the need to book seats for the X99 service* – **COMPLETE**

6) *Steve Walker, Stagecoach to look into proposal to change the time of the no. 82 bus service leaving Thurso Business Park to Wick from 0800 back to the original time of 07.45 and raise with Highland Council* – **COMPLETE**

7) *Steve Walker, Stagecoach to look into proposal to change the time of the no. 82 bus service leaving Thurso Business Park to Wick from 0800 back to the original time of 07.45* – **COMPLETE.** Not possible due to connecting times with school bus

8) *Steve Walker, Stagecoach to confirm if buses fitted with flip steps are automated – COMPLETE.*
They are not.

- It was raised that the service through Upper Gills used to stop near Canisbay but now does not. It was noted that no passengers are picked up and dropped off on the current route.

Steve Walker said that Stagecoach is happy to look into changing this service, but that this would involve changing the registration number and timetable. He noted that most changes to these services have come about through bus user groups in the past.

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

Trudy Morris stated that, with the exception of the ongoing action on timetables, all other actions from the previous meeting were now closed.

5. Bus Service Issues

Trudy Morris began by raising some issues submitted by those unable to attend.

- Alistair Christie wished to raise the issue of running times for town buses in Thurso. He noted that these buses stop running at around 3.30pm and that this makes life difficult for many – particularly elderly – people who rely on buses to get to e.g. doctors or hospital appointments.

Trudy noted that her understanding is that these are the buses which go on to the school run. This was confirmed by Steve Walker, who noted that there had previously been a request for a later town bus service in Wick, which was tried and was not well used. He explained that both town services currently run at a loss.

Steve explained that for the last 2 / 3 years Stagecoach haven't made any adverse cuts across the Highlands, despite increased costs in e.g. fuel and labour costs along with a reduction in the BSOG (which was a subsidy to the fare paying passenger) and in Concessionary Travel reimbursement where they now carry the same number of people for less money. He noted that despite their best efforts, they have found themselves in a position where they made a number of internal efficiency savings but now had to look at savings from within the network.

- Steve was asked to confirm that there would be no buses after 3pm on the 76 service. It was noted that this service is popular and often full

Steve confirmed this, and explained that even popular services are often subsidised. He noted that bus operators are a business and need to make a profit. Where a service is socially necessary but cannot be provided commercially, it is up to the council to subsidise that service.

- Steve was asked why the X97 Wick-Dunbeath service goes all the way down Lybster main street

Steve explained that the X97 effectively provides Lybster's local service, as well as linking up with the X99 to Inverness.

- It was raised that a number of other buses run empty or nearly empty. Steve was asked why they couldn't be cut instead

Steve explained that no other cut would save the same amount of money and that every other bus connected to the schools is subsidised by Highland Council.

- Steve was asked whether there is any possibility of a direct Wick – Inverness service. It was raised that it is often hard to get a seat on the service which changes at Dunbeath

Steve stated that this is not possible at the moment. He noted that the issues relating to seating are not a consequence of the Dunbeath changeover. He further noted that the seating issue is partly exacerbated by the fact that the current schedule has been successful – more people are using the service.

- Following on from this, it was raised that there can be an issue with transferring luggage at Dunbeath as the local services do not have appropriate storage facilities

Steve confirmed that Stagecoach are currently looking at this issue. He noted that relative to the size of the Caithness fleet and the profit made, the level of investment has been high.

Returning to the issue of the 76, Trudy noted that it had been suggested that another school bus could divert to encompass the route covered by the 76. Steve stated that Stagecoach would need to liaise with the council regarding this as they pay for the school buses. He noted that one potential issue is that the children who use the 76 service are not entitled to school transport due to the distance travelled.

- It was raised that this is not the first time this issue has arisen with this service. Steve was asked whether this is something which needs to be taken up with Highland Council

Steve confirmed that this was the case – they are willing to look at options for the route. Trudy stated that this is something that will be followed up with the Council along with Stagecoach to try to find a solution.

CBUG(2013)M001/A003 – Chamber & Stagecoach to follow up with Highland Council on options regarding the 76 service

- Steve was asked whether the morning 76 service would also be taken off

Steve stated that this would not happen as, at the moment, it does not cost them a bus in their fleet due to the service also being used as a Dounreay bus. Steve went on to note that over the last three years they have tried to work with the community and he is aware that Stagecoach has had a poor reputation in the area.

- It was asked whether there were any plans to integrate community services with public transport in the area

Steve stated that Stagecoach have not been approached regarding this. He noted that they were approached by Helmsdale Community Council regarding something similar which resulted in

Stagecoach subsidising Helmsdale Community Transport to provide a feeder to their Brora – Inverness service.

- The issue of linking up with other public services such as NHS Highland was raised. It was noted that they are trying to make better use of Caithness General but that this causes issues for those travelling north as the timetables do not match up

Steve noted that this was raised at the last meeting regarding the X99 service. He explained that they have to look after the majority of travellers – the northbound journeys are geared towards meeting ferries or returning passengers who travelled south earlier in the day. He noted that the numbers don't match up for other journeys.

Steve returned briefly to the issue of the 76, noting that one solution may be to work with another provider such as Dunnetts. He reiterated that they are happy to look at other solutions involving their own services.

- A concern was raised that it is hard to get to Raigmore Hospital for early-morning appointments

A number of those present mentioned the patient transport service. Steve noted that there is a pilot project in Fort William looking at patient transport and other community transport services.

- It was raised that part of the issue is that the location of medical care is being changed – most services, including the SAS, are geared towards transport to Raigmore, not to Caithness General

Trudy stated that the Bus Users Group would liaise with the NHS on this issue.

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

- It was raised, to general agreement, that the state of the buses on the Wick – Thurso route is very poor. A particular issue is that a number of the buses are not suited to the route

Steve explained that this is governed by what is needed in the fleet – particularly for the school buses. It is more cost-effective to use buses intended for school runs rather than maintain a number of separate buses. He also noted that these services are only possible due to using the resources required for the school runs and Dounreay services.

- Steve was asked why there are so many old buses in Caithness which are unsuitable for the disabled or those with pushchairs. There was some general discussion of the suitability of buses in Caithness

Steve explained that at least 60% of the fleet in Caithness is relatively new and that many of the buses on the route have at least 10 years' service life remaining. He reiterated that the type of buses used is dictated by the requirements of the school runs.

Steve noted that Caithness has had nine new buses in the last few years – six for the X99 and three for the 82 service.

- It was claimed that the buses in Caithness are fixed using cheap parts and the good buses moved south to Inverness

Steve denied this, explaining that parts for Stagecoach are bought on a group contract – the same parts are used across the whole of the UK. He noted that while they buy from the supplier with the cheapest quote at the time, the standard of parts is good as there is no point buying parts which will fail easily.

- It was claimed that Caithness has seen no benefit from Stagecoach's recent £60 million investment in bus stock

Steve explained that £2 million of the £60 million investment was spent on the nine buses mentioned earlier.

- It was raised that a number of the six new buses on the X99 route have been used on other services in the Inverness area

Steve explained that this is due to timetabling issues – one of the services would otherwise be sitting idle in Inverness for a number of hours. Steve noted that they have also added a non-new 65 seater to the X99 route to run the first southbound journey and the 14.40 northbound, as the extra capacity is required for these journeys.

- It was raised that the X99 often runs slightly late, but that there is no way for passengers to know whether a service is running seriously late or whether they have missed it

Steve explained that Stagecoach is in the process of adding automated vehicle location (AVL) to their Highland fleet. This will offer real-time information, which will be available to users via a web or phone application.

- Steve was asked whether this information would be available at bus stops

Steve explained that this is unlikely as the bus stop displays are expensive.

Trudy Morris asked whether it would be possible for the Highland Council Service Points to display this information as many bus users may not use mobile phone apps. She further asked what the timetable for this is – whether it would be this year.

Steve noted that it is currently on the Inverness vehicles but that there are still issues with it – he hopes to have the service working in Inverness by the end of this year, after which it will be rolled out.

- It was noted that Steve had mentioned earlier that Dounreay subsidise certain buses. He was asked what would happen once Dounreay closes

Steve responded that it is hard to say at this stage. They will try to run as many services as they can, probably based around the school services. He noted that a lot can happen in 8-9 years – the renewable energy industry may have an impact on the population – and that Stagecoach are as concerned with the downsizing and closure of Dounreay as anyone else.

- Steve was asked whether they are factoring this in when investing in new stock

Steve replied that they are, but that new stock can always be cascaded within the group. If the buses are no longer needed in Caithness, they can be moved to other areas. He reiterated that they will do what they can to keep services in Caithness running. He noted that Highland Council's views on transport funding may change in that time.

- The issue of cleanliness of the buses was raised. The gentleman raising the issue said he believed there was an issue with a cleaner at the Thurso depot

Steve said that he was not aware of such issue. With regards to the cleanliness of the buses, he noted that a new depot is currently under construction – this will have a bus wash.

- The issue of access to the Thurso depot was raised

Steve explained that they are trying to run a live bus depot while works are ongoing and that this has necessitated sacrifices on the part of drivers, engineers and the surrounding community.

- The same gentleman said he felt the public should be kept informed about the progress of the work

There was some discussion of this matter – Steve explained that the households around the depot are kept informed, but he doesn't see how it affects the general bus using public. He noted that they do not at present have a completion date for the depot works.

- He also felt that access to information at the depot is very poor and felt that the staff were not delivering information in an effective manner

Steve said they could take this up with depot staff if there was an issue. At this stage there was general dissent from the floor – the overall feeling from those present was that the depot staff are very helpful.

Trudy Morris returned briefly to the issue of timescales for the depot construction. Steve explained that the work will get done as quickly as possible but reiterated that there is no definite end date as yet.

- One user raised a concern regarding designated stops. She had heard that buses will now only be stopping at these and explained that her nearest stop is some distance away

Steve stated that this was not the case. While there have been issues in the towns, there are no plans to introduce this policy for country routes.

- It was suggested that an organisation such as HITRANS could provide funding for bus services

Steve explained that HITRANS have very little funding themselves and that even with limited powers and funding they do all they can to benefit the Highland region.

- The same bus user explained that he felt the money put into developing reports would be better spent on services

Steve explained that Government funding can often only be delivered for capital projects rather than subsidies.

- Trudy Morris raised an issue on behalf of Judy Georgeson from Dunbeath. She lives near the war memorial, and has recently been disturbed on three consecutive nights by the 10.45pm bus. As far as she is aware, this is only a request stop for the late night service. In particular, on the night of the 15th May, the bus went round the memorial without stopping and nobody got off or on. She is generally in bed by this time and her sleep has been disturbed by these buses.
- She wondered if drivers are unaware that this is a request stop only for the late night service?
- She did note that, in general, things are better than they used to be at the memorial stop – most drivers now switch their engines off while waiting.

Steve confirmed that this should be a request stop only on the journey in question. He felt that this was likely down to force of habit – all the other X99 services make that stop. Trudy asked if a memo could be put out to drivers. Steve noted that there is already a note on the driver's dashboard reminding them of this.

CBUG(2013)M001/A005 – *Stagecoach to issue memo to drivers reminding them that Dunbeath is a request stop on the last X99 service.*

- Steve was asked why buses have to stop at the war memorial, rather than on the road

Steve explained that this was decided based on a number of factors including safety of passengers. From discussions with Dunbeath residents, most of them are happy with the situation as it stands.

- Steve was asked if there was a possibility of reinstating a service with no change at Dunbeath

Steve explained that the current service has been extremely successful and they are unlikely to change it. He noted that if they are adding extra journeys at some point, they may include direct services.

- One gentleman had an issue relating to the timetable on the Wick – Castletown service

Steve explained that this was a similar issue to those previously raised – they try to run as many services as possible cost-effectively.

Trudy asked if Steve had any update to give from Stagecoach. Steve stated that they have no real updates to give at the moment. He wished to reiterate that they have tried hard to keep things stable and want to continue building on the network.

- Steve was asked what the changes advertised for Monday 17th June are

He noted that the main change is the removal of the 76, as already discussed.

A statement was made from the floor in support of the drivers in the area, to general agreement. Steve noted that their customer service surveys have highlighted this.

- Steve was asked why Stagecoach do not ask their drivers for suggestions on changes or improvements to the service

He explained that they do – they meet once a month with union representatives where a number of issues are raised and dealt with.

- Steve was asked whether they have any way of tracking where passengers are or are not being picked up and dropped off

Steve explained that they gather a lot of this kind of information, from sources such as ticket machines and feedback from drivers

- Steve was asked if there was any need for the X99 to travel through Dornoch and Tain, as the X25 service also serves this area. It was raised that this may be a safety issue as the roads in Tain do not appear suited to the buses.

Steve explained that the current schedule was decided as part of the X99 consultations and is based on feedback from users along the whole route. Regarding the safety issue, Steve noted that the drivers are well trained.

- Steve was asked why the bus from Scrabster does not go via the railway station but instead goes straight into Thurso town centre

Steve explained that the bus does go past the railway station after the town centre. He explained that they wish to get people into Thurso as quickly and directly as possible.

6. Any Other Business

No other business was raised.

7. Date of Next Meeting

The next meeting of the Caithness Bus Users Group was agreed to be held in Thurso on Friday 6th December.

Trudy Morris thanked all for attending and closed the meeting.

Actions ongoing from previous meetings

CBUG February 2012, Action 1 – See **CBUG(2013)M001/A001**

Actions arising from this meeting

CBUG(2013)M001/A001 – *Stagecoach and Chamber to follow up with Highland Council on issues with timetables in Caithness and Sutherland.*

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

CBUG(2013)M001/A003 – *Stagecoach and Chamber to follow up with Highland Council on options regarding the 76 service*

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

CBUG(2013)M001/A005 – *Stagecoach to issue memo to drivers reminding them that Dunbeath is a request stop on the last X99 service*

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