

RELBUS

Note of AGM held at Council Chambers, Dunbar Town House 7pm 29/3/12

Present - Peter Armstrong (Chair)
Colin Barnes
Gavin Booth, Bus Users UK
Ian Gray, MSP
Cllr Barry Turner (ELC)
Representative of Dunpender CC
Alison Cosgrove (Dunpender CC)
Representative of Dunbar CC
Steven King
Philip Immirzi
Morag Haddow (Sustaining Dunbar)
Judy Miller (“)

PA gave a summary of RELBUS's year:- Most of the work has been relating to complaints, but RELBUS have managed to hold meetings in Dunbar, Haddington and East Linton. Meetings have also been held with Paul Thomas from First and Richard Perryman. Both were keen to help, for example Mr Perryman will be looking at reintroducing the hourly 253 service in the summer and also extending bus routes to serve the newer housing developments in Dunbar. RELBUS has lost a few committee members and is therefore looking to increase membership and find new committee members. It was noted that no-one from the various Community Councils wanted to join the Committee.

GB gave a brief introduction about Bus Users UK:- The organisation has been around for 25 years and work to get a good deal for bus passengers, who could join as an individual or a group. He then outlined what was important in a successful bus service:-

1. Information

Bus companies and local authorities should provide good information about services, but the current standard is variable. You can now access information through websites, on your phone, but the best place for it is at the bus stop. The information needed includes:-

- When is the bus due.
- Where is it going to.
- How long will the journey take.
- What the route number is.
- How much the journey will cost – passengers are effectively being asked to buy something without knowing how much it costs.
- Something to show that the information is up to date, such as when it was updated.

2. Bus Stops

Bus stops should ideally:-

- Provide some form of shelter.
- Provide light to read the information by and ensure personal security.
- Enable passengers to feel comfortable and safe.

Poor information and shelters can put people off of using buses, especially those who haven't used the bus very much such as people who have recently got concession cards and might want to use the bus for the first time.

3. Buses

Buses should:-

- Be clean.
- Be accessible.
- Be comfortable (n.b heating controlled by depot engineers, not drivers).
- Have enough capacity so passengers don't have to stand.

Bus drivers are the public face of the bus company. Driver attitude is very important to bus passengers, basic politeness and eye contact.

GB then outlined some of the services Bus Users UK could provide:-

Complaints Procedures

If you've had a poor bus journey, your first contact should be with the bus company, but if you haven't had a satisfactory answer from the bus company then you can go to the Bus Passengers Platform, which is a court of last resort. They do not deal with issues relating to commercial matters such as timings and routing of buses. They will deal with issues such as buses driving past stops, driver rudeness and state of vehicles. The bus companies are getting better at dealing with complaints and often provide travel vouchers as compensation. Common local problems are often best dealt with by holding a meeting between local passengers and the bus companies.

Your Bus Matters

This is a Bus Users UK initiative in which a bus is parked in the High Street with representatives of the bus companies and local authorities on board to provide an opportunity for the public to go and talk about services. They are usually very useful as bus companies get to hear direct from their customers what the actual problems are and what services are needed, using them as a form of market research.

Getting More People to Use Buses

The whole bus experience has to be very good to get people out of their cars; it has to be affordable, punctual and reliable.

It is a very good transport alternative for the over 60's, it is important to get them to try it. Concessionary fares give older people freedom and encourage them to get out

of their houses, remain active and help with health issues. (N.b bus companies get 67p in every £ back from the government for concessionary fares).

A discussion then followed about local services. The main points were:-

First Buses

The standard of First buses from Dunbar to Edinburgh is diabolical; they are old and very unreliable, there have been 7 breakdowns in the past fortnight. There is a big problem with accessibility on the coach style buses and the accessible buses are old and break down.

East Linton Service

East Linton CC estimates that around 350 people use buses in East Linton. The First and Perrymans service are too close to each other time wise.

Commercial and Supported Services

BT outlined East Lothian Council's current position; the supported services are under contract for the next 4 years, but there is some flexibility within the contracts for some tweaking. ELC held a recent conference on public transport solutions and are currently working on the outcomes, some of which could be done fairly quickly. GB noted that North Yorkshire County Council has withdrawn all their supported services. Scotland has fared somewhat better with fewer cuts.

Services to Other Towns in East Lothian

It seems to be generally assumed that everyone in Dunbar/East Linton wants to travel to Edinburgh and nowhere else. There is not a direct service to the job centre in Musselburgh, and local people without cars are also missing out on job opportunities in North Berwick, Port Seton and other towns because of a lack of a direct or reliable service.

Deregulation

The competition arising from deregulation doesn't seem to be helping passengers, and is thwarting integration. In the early days of deregulation there was a lot of cut throat competition, but it seems that nationalised monopolies have merely been replaced with private monopolies.

IG said that the Scottish Labour Party pursued changes to deregulation but couldn't get support from other parties. Agreed that competition doesn't serve passengers well, but changes are unlikely.

It was suggested that Quality Contracts could be used by East Lothian Council; to encourage bus companies to change their services.

GB noted that the Dunbar Area is suffering because of a lack of competition. First are not making money in East Lothian and are looking to sell their routes and depots covering East and Mid Lothian, possibly to Lothian Buses. This might possibly lead to a better service as Lothian are one of the top 10 bus operators in the UK. It should at least be seen as an opportunity to get in and campaign for the services local people want.

GB cited Oxford as a good example of competition working for the good of passengers. Two competing bus companies combined services, providing alternate buses and introduced common ticketing. It was agreed that common ticketing would be a good start here.

Opportunities for New Services

Bus companies don't seem to want to grow their businesses or get more customers at all, there have been no new routes locally for a long time.

IG said that there was a half hourly service which was funded by Kickstart, an initiative which funds services which might not be commercially viable at the start to get it established and build up passenger numbers.

It was agreed that it was important to provide information about any new service to ensure that everyone was aware of it. The recent 1A Asda bus was cited as an example of a service which few people knew about.

It was suggested that RELBUS could collect information about the new routes that are needed locally and feed this back to the bus companies. CB thought that this might be a bit beyond RELBUS at the moment; Sustaining Dunbar offered to help with this. BT offered help to act as broker to organise a bus and staff for a Your Bus Matters in Dunbar High Street, which would provide a good opportunity to get feedback about new routes.

GB said that bus companies are open to trying new routes, but need some evidence that the demand is there, and would probably concentrate on one or two routes at most. Again, it was emphasised that wide scale information would need to be provided to local people about any new services to ensure that they were used.

Bus Fares

Local bus fares are much higher than fares in and around Edinburgh. First especially are too expensive and people are reluctant to use them, preferring Eve and Perrymans where possible.

Bus companies are responsible for setting their fares. It has been estimated that to put one extra bus into service costs approx. £100,000.

Rural Services

Perhaps smaller buses could be considered for rural demands. Many rural areas currently have less than 3 services a day, which is not really perceived as a service by the public.

Ways Forward

GB suggested that the way forward for RELBUS would be to keep the group together and maintain dialogue with the bus companies. Think about putting on local bus service surgeries or a Your Bus Matters. Hold focus groups with disgruntled passengers and bus companies for particular areas of discontent, and keep plugging away with the bus companies and East Lothian Council.

GB also said that it would be useful for RELBUS to identify gaps in local services and missing connections. It should be noted that people often said that they wanted a bus from A to B, but in reality wouldn't use it. Realistic options and sensible suggestions were needed for routes which would be well used.

PI had e-mailed existing members and the general consensus was that RELBUS should not give up yet.

IG said that without RELBUS, there is no cross East Lothian Group. If there is to be a change of provider from First to Lothian we will need to protect services, but it will also be a good opportunity to influence routes. Suggested that RELBUS talk to bus companies to ask if it can advertise on the buses, it would suit the bus companies to have an official forum.

BT questioned whether the group should keep rural in its name as it might be putting people off joining.

Meeting closed 8.30pm