



RELBUS ANNUAL REPORT

Highlights of 2014-2015

STATEMENT FROM THE CHAIRMAN

*The **Rural East Lothian Bus Users (RELBUS)** group provides an established forum for local views on bus operations and a vehicle for those concerns to be discussed, analysed and passed on as appropriate to the council and operators.*

Four committee meetings have been held this year, attended by representatives of Community Councils and other parties interested in local bus issues. In addition we have kept up our inputs to other forums, processes and organisations and have sought to influence those making decisions about bus services and indeed other transport provision. Our Bus Passenger Charter continues to frame our expectations from local services, and we are particularly disappointed that First Scotland East no longer appear to be endorsing the standards they signed up to; consequently we are now reviewing their status as a signatory to the Charter.

I should like to thank all those who regularly attend our meetings and those who, on a voluntary basis, promote the RELBUS cause at events around and beyond East Lothian. Whenever I can I personally promote the concept of the four letter 'I's that RELBUS has identified as a basis for the improvement of public transport: Integration, Innovation, Information and Involvement. In this annual report we have focussed on three other letter 'I's as headings under which we set out our activities over the year: Issues, Inputs and Initiatives.

Barry Turner, chair of Rural East Lothian Bus Users
info@relbus.org.uk

ISSUES

Social exclusion

Highlighted in last year's annual report, several small communities continue to be without any kind of bus service. We agreed with the council that, even after the revision of the supported bus network made some improvements, there remains an urgent need for action in Humbie, Garvald and Oldhamstocks. We have been given reassurances that solutions, possibly novel in nature, are being investigated and we eagerly await the outcome.

Bus service performance

A key issue that has arisen during the year is the poor performance of First Scotland East on its East Lothian trunk services. We have had more complaints about this than on any other issue, about breakdowns, missing buses and even buses catching fire. So much so that we asked some local users to monitor the incidents. Together with Bus Users Scotland we held a special meeting with First's local management where we put the issues to them. The outcome was depressing and there seems little hope of any new buses being allocated by First HQ. It seems that East Lothian is the poor relation in their eyes. We have asked the council to instigate discussions, using the evidence available, and to seek a resolution. Failing that the matter may have to be referred to the Traffic Commissioner.

Bus/rail connectivity

We repeatedly hear complaints about the lack of co-ordination between bus and train timetables. There are some worrying examples of buses timed to leave immediately before a train arrives or buses failing to wait even a minute or so if a train is late. Since we made suggestions to the council about changes to supported bus route timetables there has been some action. However, the underlying problem is that we do not have a public transport system where all modes work together for the benefit of the traveller; the council, commercial bus operators and Scotrail all do their own thing. There is much talk about the need for integration but little in the way of action. It is one of our four components for improved public transport and we shall continue to campaign for it.

Timetables at bus stops

Another frequent complaint to RELBUS during the year has been about timetable information at bus stops, or rather the lack of it, for some services. The problem seems to stem from the fact that there is competing demand for space by the different operators and no overall responsibility for the displays. The council has undertaken to take the matter in hand. If the information at a bus stop in your area is inadequate, do let us know by emailing info@relbus.org.uk and we will pass this on.

INPUTS

Supported services

Most local buses are run on a commercial basis, but the council pays for the provision of some services (known as 'supported services') where these are not commercially viable. RELBUS submitted a lengthy response to the council's service review and tendering process. It concentrated on timetable changes which could improve the services dramatically, particularly bus/rail connectivity, and stressed the importance of clock-face timetables which are easier for passengers. We also highlighted concerns about a lack of public transport in rural area and about the needs of tourists. New services began running earlier this year and a subsequent representation was made pointing out some continuing problems.

East Lothian Bus Forum

During the past year, there have been two meetings of the council's Bus Forum, where councillors, officers, bus operators, and communities can make constructive plans for the future of local services. RELBUS takes an active part in the discussions and is always asked to contribute agenda items based on issues raised with us e.g. bus/rail connectivity, implementing the Bus Passenger Charter, transport provision in isolated areas, timetables and the promotion of services by operators.

Area Partnerships

Though in some other capacity, RELBUS committee members are on the boards of many of the East Lothian Area Partnerships. Public transport issues are frequently raised at the Area Partnerships and this provides a useful connection with our work and a cross-fertilisation of ideas.

East Lothian on the Move

This initiative from the Area Partnerships appointed consultants to hold a series of events across East Lothian to look at travel habits and encourage more sustainable travel. RELBUS representatives attended a number of these to ensure that the role and the potential of the bus is fully appreciated. The RELBUS chairman is a member of the steering group which is overseeing the work of the consultants.

Community Rail Partnership

Committee member Harry Barker is Chairman of the East Lothian Community Rail Partnership (ELCRP) which is working constructively with train operators to promote local rail travel. Under the rail franchise awarded to Abellio earlier this year, there is a commitment to integrate bus services and train services wherever possible, and ELCRP are looking at ways of achieving this in North Berwick, Dunbar and Longniddry. The easiest to achieve is at North Berwick which is cost neutral and would involve minor bus route changes enabling subsidised buses to terminate at the station providing robust hourly connections to tourist attractions and villages which in turn will encourage through ticketing of train/bus hugely opening up public transport possible usage and non-car tourism. By so doing it will mean that under the Equality Act (2010) that disabled passengers will be able to take advantage of these robust connections. This has not yet been achieved and negotiations will continue. ELCRP has the ultimate discretion to refer bus connectivity to Transport Scotland, and it will do so if a local solution cannot be found.

In addition, ELCRP have produced a common standard of timetable presentation which includes details of bus/train connections in both timetables, and use of the rail 'double-arrow' symbol at bus stops either at or near railway stations.

INITIATIVES

Bus services in residential areas

RELBUS was asked to suggest standards for bus service provision that should be applied in new housing developments. This is important given the scale of new housing proposed across East Lothian and the need to get residents using public transport at the outset. We responded with an eleven point list covering action by developers, the council and bus operators. This has also been sent to the Royal Town Planning Institute in Scotland and to the South East Scotland Transport Partnership (SEStran). We hope it will form a basis for recommendations in the Local Transport Strategy.

Improving connectivity

We have referred to bus/rail connectivity and a current priority is to monitor interchange arrangements and suggest improvements. In particular we have identified issues at North Berwick station and put forward ideas on how buses there can better relate to the trains, something that would particularly benefit tourists. Our involvement with the Community Rail Partnership should help in this respect.

Bus Passenger Charter

As one of our key initiatives the East Lothian Bus Passenger Charter agreed a set of standards of service with the 5 local bus operators. It sets out the responsibilities of the bus operators, actions that the council will take to support bus operations, how the council, operators and passenger groups will work together to deliver improvements and what is expected of passengers as part of the deal.

We are pleased by the enthusiasm with which the Bus Charter has been embraced by Eve's, Prentice, Perryman's and Lothian Country buses, all of whom proudly make reference to it in their literature and are striving to live up to its ambitions. First Scotland East however, have shown little interest since the charter was agreed in 2013 and the numerous complaints which we have passed on regarding their local service have led us to consider, with ELC, whether their presence should be removed from the charter. A copy of the charter is available at www.relbus.org.uk and from East Lothian Council through its offices and libraries.

ABOUT RELBUS

The Rural East Lothian Bus Users group (RELBUS) was formed in 2012 to provide a voice for bus passengers in East Lothian. We are simply a group of volunteers who are concerned about the quality of our local bus services.

Our aims are to liaise with the bus service providers to:

- improve the reliability and frequency of the local bus services
- promote and encourage the use of the local bus services
- negotiate reasonable fares/season tickets/discount cards for local people

We represent people living in and travelling to rural East Lothian, whether they live work or play in the area. We focus on issues affecting rural areas as these generally have the poorest quality of service, but speak up for all bus users in East Lothian. We welcome new members. Email info@relbus.org.uk to find out more.