

RELBUS AGM 2013 Highlights of the year

Statement from the chair

It has been a year since I took up the role of RELBUS chair in the aftermath of the devastating service cuts made by First. These cuts clearly demonstrated that the current legal framework for the operation of bus services does not always work in the best interests of the passengers. In the year things thankfully have settled down and it can be argued that overall we have better service provision now than before the cuts. This is in no small measure due to the cooperation of operators and the efforts of East Lothian Council. It has also been a year in which RELBUS has been particularly active promoting its own initiatives, sometimes jointly with others, and responding in a creative and positive manner to external initiatives.

I am encouraged by the new emphasis being given to bus operations by the council through the establishment of a Bus Forum and through various initiatives to improve the lot of the bus passenger. I welcome the Scottish Government's announcement of a Bus Investment Fund but remain concerned that bus operators do not get the level of government financial support that the use and potential of buses surely justifies. Concerns often expressed to me about the organisation of and responsibility for bus services have been reflected in MSP Iain Gray's draft Bus Bill, currently being consulted upon. Though its provisions may evolve and be adapted as a result of those consultations, the focus that it places on the issues and the need for change is to be welcomed.

All in all it has been a good year for RELBUS and I believe a better year for those who rely on bus services in rural East Lothian. Prospects look good for positive changes to come. I thank all those involved within RELBUS and in organisations working with RELBUS for their contribution to the cause.

BARRY TURNER

Chair of RELBUS

RELBUS is reaching out to its members

Membership

RELBUS membership remains free and has grown to 113 members across the county.

Financial report

RELBUS continues to operate without financial resources, but has received £50 contribution from Dunpender Community Council, which remains unspent.

At the time of writing we are investigating formalising our financial arrangements.

Current bus issues

RELBUS continues to channel bus users' concerns to East Lothian Council regarding supported services, bus service issues, information gaps and bus stop infrastructure. We want this to work better in future and will be looking at finding more effective ways of using available technology to promote feedback.

Lobbying for better public transport capacity

RELBUS continues to lobby East Lothian Council to maintain and improve public transport specialisms in the local authority, concerned by budget cuts and voluntary early retirement and redundancy schemes.

Bus stop infrastructure

We've long been concerned by the poor state of bus stops throughout East Lothian. We welcome the recent moves to improve information and look forward to the new information panels. In the mean time we will continue to apply pressure on the council to improve infrastructure and ensure that it is vandalism free, welcoming and clean.

RELBUS communications

We put out a number of press releases over the year and received positive coverage in the local press. In the last year we've developed our website effectively adding new material regularly. With help from Sustaining Dunbar we created a mobile version of the website designed primarily to promote the different ways that information about buses can be accessed on the move. Following a rapid review of the increasingly wide variety of materials available online, mobile.RELBUS.org.uk was created. We also experimented with crowd-sourcing information about the condition of our bus stops, over at betterruralbuses.org.uk and lately added twitter to our repertoire.

RELBUS is working in partnership

Passenger Charter - A Working Group has been set up

We've made progress on our idea to get all parties to sign up to our Draft Passenger Charter. A short-life working group has been convened including bus passengers reps, council and operators who will refine and present the Charter to next Bus Forum. The Charter idea developed from RELBUS policy work we consulted on in the last year to articulate a more passenger-centric view of how bus services could be.

Community Bus Partnerships

A proposal for Community Bus Partnerships along the lines of the very successful Community Rail Partnerships in England is being developed by Morag Haddow of Sustaining Dunbar. The idea is to increase patronage of the buses by marketing and working more closely with communities along certain routes. Buses and bus stops could play a key role in the promotion of local events either through leaflets/posters in the buses or at the bus stops.

Rural Bus Hubs

Creating focal points for sustainable transport in small communities was the theme of a proposal developed by Sustaining Dunbar and supported by RELBUS and East Lothian Council for the Green Transport Award. Although we were unsuccessful, we got through two rounds and still hold onto the idea that a prominent and welcoming bus hub could raise the profile of local bus services and with relatively small amounts of investment in bus-stop infrastructure we can change the way people look at local public transport.

RELBUS is influencing Bus policy

East Lothian Bus Forum

We were really very pleased that our ideas for setting up such a forum, loosely modelled on successful community rail format, were adopted by East Lothian Councillor Michael Veitch. Both meetings to date have been really well attended with all the operators, many Community Councils and other interested parties present.

Operators and the Council are seeing the benefits of informed consultation, and we are appreciating the small but important movements on policies we'd like to see implemented.

Consultation and Bi-annual Supported Service and Timetable Review

We were pleased that ELC recently introduced a new six-monthly review of supported services with operators, which in future should mean that supported service timetables will change at set times each year, like train timetables, making things more predicable for bus users. It is hoped that the commercial operators will follow suit. RELBUS is

keen that bus users can make their views known before decisions are made. It is important therefore that we continue to channel problems and issues through Community Councils, RELBUS meetings, and to ELC officers, and to the operators themselves.

Combined timetables

At long last East Lothian Council is proposing to produce combined operator timetables for bus stops. This is a very welcome step as RELBUS regularly gets complaints about inadequate bus stop information.

Bus Investment Fund

The new Scottish Government Bus Investment Fund was recently announced and council officers are keen to explore a 'fastlink' by bus from Haddington to the Park and Ride at Wallyford, and a bid for funding for this is being taken forward by Haddington Community Development Trust. The key criteria to attract funding are: modal shift from private to public transport, partnership working and match funding. RELBUS and Sustaining Dunbar are also pursuing a complementary proposal tying in transport hubs, and potentially Community Bus Partnerships, see also above.

Bus Bill - consultation

RELBUS welcomes the new focus that Iain Gray's consultation will give to developing better public transport and potentially enable network efficiencies that the current loosely regulated environment seems unable to put in place. RELBUS will submit a response to the consultation in due course, but encourages individuals and community organisations to do so too. Deadline: 30 August 2013 by email to bus.bill@scottish.parliament.uk