

Item:

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Report to Partnership Meeting 21 April 2023

RESEARCH AND STRATEGY DELIVERY

Bus Taskforce Regional Steering Group

Purpose of Report

To update Board Members and Advisors on the first meeting of the Bus Taskforce Regional Steering Group.

Background

Officers reported to the Partnership meeting in November 2022 on the progress made through the Bus Taskforce which was established by the Minister for Transport. The taskforce will address the immediate challenges to help bus networks move to a more sustainable footing following Covid and ensure that recovery is fully supported by wider policies to improve bus services across Scotland.

It will specifically review and coordinate immediate activity to support patronage recovery, to address workforce retention and recruitment, and to ensure proactive communication and engagement with bus users as networks adapt post Covid.

The Taskforce itself has met three times with a final meeting scheduled to take place in June 2023.

Three sub groups have also been formed with relevant stakeholders covering:

1. Patronage growth
2. Driver shortages
3. Community engagement

Transport Scotland also asked RTPs to develop appropriate arrangements for Regional Steering Groups whose output will be fed into the Taskforce through the RTP members on the Taskforce. The intention for the regional steering groups is to establish a group of stakeholders to consider and address regional short term issues/challenges whilst keeping sight of the longer term strategic goals for transport in the region. These steering groups are designed to continue beyond the lifetime of the Taskforce.

Highlands and Islands Regional Steering Group

The first meeting of the Highlands and Islands Regional Steering Group took place on Wednesday 23rd March. The meeting was chaired by HITRANS Board Member, Robert Andrew. The agenda was focussed on the purpose of the Bus Taskforce to ensure that the information submitted from the Regional Steering Group could capture the regional perspective to the immediate challenges around Patronage Recovery; Driver Shortages and Community Engagement. Other agenda items helped set the scene for the discussion with excellent presentations from Roisin Curran of Transport Scotland on the Community Bus Fund, Rebecca Purvis on the MOOVE Flexi Digital Demand Responsive Transport Platform and Julie Cromarty on the Highland Bus Partnership Fund and Bus Service Improvement Partnership.

A note of the meeting is included as an appendix to this report for more detailed information on the discussion and this will be shared with Transport Scotland as an input to the Bus Taskforce.

Recommendation

1. Members are asked to note the report.

Risk Register

RTS Delivery

Impact - Positive

Comment – The Taskforce and Steering Group offers an opportunity for a renewed focus and energy on growing bus use that will allow developments identified in the RTS to be taken forward if they offer a way of increasing bus patronage.

Policy

Impact - Positive

Financial

Impact – Neutral

Equality

Impact – Positive

Report by:

Ranald Robertson

Designation:

Partnership Director

Date:

6th April 2023

Background Papers:

Appendix – Highlands and Islands Steering Group Report

Appendix: Report of Highlands and Islands Steering Group Meeting

The first Highlands and Islands Bus Taskforce Regional Steering Group meeting took place through Microsoft Teams on Wednesday 22nd March 2023.

The following attendees joined the meeting:

Robert Andrew, Board Member of HITRANS and Director of Scottish Citylink
Duncan Aitken, DA Travel
Colin Craig, West Coast Motors
Matthew Aird, Stagecoach Highland
David MacGillivray, Shiel Buses
Naomi Bremner, Board Member of HITRANS and Eyland Skyn
Roisin Curran, Transport Scotland
Colin Simpson, Cairngorms National Park Authority
Nicholas Sobey, Highlands and Islands Enterprise
Iain MacInnes, Argyll and Bute Council
Julie Cromarty, Highland Council
David Summers, Highland Council
Nicola Moss, Moray Council
Laura Cromarty, Orkney Islands Council
Jim Morrison, Comhairle na Eilean Siar
Neil MacRae, HITRANS
Rebecca Purvis, HITRANS
Ranald Robertson, HITRANS

Robert Andrew chaired the meeting and opened proceedings by welcoming everyone to the session and inviting everyone to introduce themselves.

Background to Bus Taskforce

Ranald Robertson of HITRANS presented a paper setting out the background to the Bus Taskforce and explaining that Transport Scotland recognised that each region will be different and therefore in asking RTPs to establish Regional Steering Groups they have not been prescriptive to allow freedom for groups to include topics and membership based on what best suits local needs.

Regional Steering Groups output will be fed into the Taskforce through the RTP members on the Taskforce. The agenda today reflects the primary focus on the immediate challenges facing the bus industry, and updates to and from the Taskforce will reflect this. However, regional groups are encouraged to consider a wider scope to include all forms of transport. This will allow the Regional Steering Group to evolve and develop into a useful forum that allows key issues for Bus in the Highlands and Islands to be captured and addressed as a partnership within our region but also to present to Transport Scotland / Scottish Government as required.

Rural Bus Service Support and Funding

Ranald Robertson introduced the report on Rural Bus Service Support and Funding published by HITRANS in 2021. This sought to make the case for funding interventions to allow ambitions around mode shift from the private car to be realised in rural and island areas. This followed on from the National Transport Strategy's positive Vision that commits to be a Transport Strategy for all of Scotland recognising the different needs and challenges the country faces, reaching out beyond the silos that

exist in terms of responsibility of Scotland's transport infrastructure, services and assets. Local bus services across Scotland have been in sharp decline for the last 15 years.

HITRANS report recognised issues affecting rural bus which stemmed from a reduction in funding to support local transport authorities' ability to maintain let alone extend local bus service provision and the relative paucity of funding for rural bus in comparison to support for interventions in favour of urban passenger transport.

The report set out a number of recommended actions that Scottish Government could take that would allow Transport Scotland, RTPs, Local Authorities and Community Transport groups to work together to deliver a pipeline approach that would make a real and lasting difference for sustainable travel in rural areas. These recommendations represent a useful set of interventions that could be considered under the Bus Taskforce and the recommendations are listed below:

- a) Recognition that the national concessionary fare scheme has an in-built unfairness for rural areas. Consider utilising the Bus Service Operator Grant as a mechanism to deliver equity for rural bus services.
- b) Introduce a Rural Transport Fund delivered at RTP level.
- c) Introduce RTP capital passenger transport grant. In the past HITRANS received £3.5m each year to deliver these types of improvements and this level of support would allow us to make a real difference to the infrastructure, interchange and travel information experience offered to passengers.
- d) Introducing an Enhanced DRT funding stream administered at RTP level and developed collaboratively with local authorities and community anchor groups.
- e) Work with bus manufacturers to develop an affordable multi-purpose accessible bus design that is fit for purpose for rural bus service.
- f) Investigate the potential for more regional collaboration on Public Transport and DRT management and operations.

Subsequent discussion highlighted a number of points raised in the paper including, challenge around revenue funding, significant rises in cost of contracts, integration with school services has saved a lot of public services in rural areas by meeting fixed costs.

Digital Demand Responsive Transport (MOOVE Flexi) – Presentation by Rebecca Purvis

Rebecca Purvis presented on the MOOVE Flexi Digital Demand Responsive app that has been developed by HITRANS with support from Transport Scotland, Scottish Government Islands Team and EU funding. Key items covered included:

- 3-year contract awarded to Liftango
- User Application
- Operations portal
- Driver Interface and tablet
- MOOVE flexi is available to any existing DRT service in the Highlands and Islands, at no cost to the operator. This can include any existing fixed route operations with an on-request element or for a service that might move from fixed route to on demand.
- Current status of on boarded operators.
 - Moray Council completed soft trial of the system July-August 22. Preparing to fully launch with their own branded version of the app 'M.Connect'.
 - The Ferintosh Community Bus fully launched in Oct 22.
 - Durness Bus company are in the process of launching.

- Discussion have taken place with Aurora Travel, Barra about on-boarding their services.

A point raised in the follow up discussion was the importance that DRT operations operate to complement existing networks and those services should be featured alongside the DRT services.

Highland Bus Partnership Fund and BSIP – Presentation by Julie Cromarty

Julie Cromarty provided a presentation giving an overview of the Highland Bus Services Improvement Partnership (BSIP) and Bus Partnership Fund (BPF) Projects in Inverness and Fort William.

Bus Service Improvement Partnerships (BSIPs)

- provisions introduced by the Transport (Scotland) Act 2019.
- intended to support improvements in bus services by partnership working between local authorities and bus operators.
- Highland Council, HITRANS and Bus Operators (currently Stagecoach & Shiel) are working on the formation of a formal BSIP for Inverness & Fort William and a steering group meets every two weeks providing oversight for the BPF projects.
- The formulation of a BSIP formed part of the funding conditions for the BPF.

The intention is that Councils will invest in facilities (i.e., infrastructure such as bus lanes or traffic light priorities) and measures (i.e., initiatives, other than infrastructure, designed to promote bus use) and operators will develop their services, for example by higher frequencies or new, better buses. To enable Councils to invest in facilities, the Scottish Government introduced a Bus Partnership Fund of £500 million over 5 years.

THC secured c£3million for BPF projects in Inverness & Fort William for phase 1 funding in Spring 2021. This funding has supported a mixture of ‘quick win’ projects & STAG Appraisals to identify preferred interventions and the business case for more strategic bus priority projects on key bus corridors. Bus lane enforcement on the Rose St exit to Inverness Bus station and traffic light priorities at multiple signalised junctions in Inverness have already been implemented.

It was noted that BPF funding had also been awarded to Argyll and Bute Council for interventions in the Oban area.

Community Bus Fund

Roisin Curran introduced the Community Bus Fund capturing the following key points:

- 2023/24 - £5M capital allocated and £0.75M for revenue support.
- Uncertain if this will increase in future years.
- Priorities are expected to be:
 - Focus on rural deprivation and transport poverty.
 - Exploration of Transport Act Powers
 - Improvement of Local Services
 - Integration between modes
 - Trialling innovative solutions
 - Digital DRT / MaaS pilots would fit with this.
 - Local Authority Service operation would be supported but the availability of funding means there should be no double counting of funding with other streams such as SCOTZEB.
 - Potential capping of funding at a RTP level so funds are not distributed unevenly.

In the group discussion that followed Roisin's presentation points raised included:

- SIMD does not recognise transport in the measurement.
- Revenue funding is the real challenge in many rural and island areas.
- Distinction between rural and remote rural key in terms of challenges faced.
- Building up data on bus stop infrastructure and access to bus stops investment needs will help.
 - This has started in Inverness and Orkney
- Access to bus stops (footpaths) and the infrastructure for waiting is really important and needs to be improved.
- Improving information provision would be a priority.
- Single year funding is not ideal. It would be better to have comfort for multi-year funding to ensure results can be achieved and captured from the funding.
- Bus Route Development Grants worked well in the past to mix a kick start of service towards commercial operation and the opportunity to improve infrastructure and information but need linked to expanding development to be commercial in long-term.
- Real Time Information and Tracking System development could be a useful area to focus on in our area where lower frequency of services make connections even more vital.

It was agreed that it would be beneficial if all Local Authorities work with Hitrans to look to secure Community Bus Funding to enable improvements to bus stop infrastructure and information provision.

Growing Bus Patronage in the Region.

With reflection on the earlier items and presentations the first open Discussion session of the day focussed on the topic of Growing Bus Patronage in the Region.

Discussion points included:

- Orkney bus passenger numbers have rebounded to higher than pre pandemic levels. This has been driven by:
 - New bus fleet
 - Revenue back to local authority with a commitment to reinvest through a green transport fund.
 - New evening services introduced.
- Real challenge for rural bus operation particularly at times of day
- Need to recognise that times have changed and working patterns have changed and the services should cater for this new normal, so 2019 is not necessarily the best comparator.
- Adapting Ticketing / Fares to reflect new working patterns.
- Western Isles figures are down 80% on pre pandemic levels but there had been a service design that led to reduced bus mileage in late 2019 so the passenger numbers would have been reduced as a result of that.
- Over 60s concessionary patronage has lagged overall patronage.
- An **Action** was agreed that HITRANS will develop a workstream to capture opportunities that could be developed as a route map towards growing bus patronage across the Highlands and Islands.

Scale of Driver Shortage Issues in the Region

The second open Discussion item focussed on Driver Shortages in the context of the Highlands and Islands.

Discussion Points includes:

- Industry wide issues
- Brexit a factor
- Wage competition with HGV sector has been a factor.
- DVLA licensing implosion
- Health appointments has been a contributory factor that has forced people out of the industry.
- Non-UK Licenced staff has been looked at.
- In the Highlands and Islands Housing is a key problem in recruiting and retaining staff.
- A differential noted was that Driver Recruitment has not been a challenge in Moray where the availability of former MOD staff who live in the area has meant there have been an opportunity to recruit quite readily.

How do we better engage our communities?

The final discussion session focussed on how we can improve community engagement to better engage our communities on bus services and connectivity.

The following key points were captured from the Discussion around this Bus Taskforce activity:

- The BSIP was suggested as an area where Highland Council are looking to establish a formal process of Community Engagement that would look to replicate a strong transport forum in Caithness across the Highland area.
- Need to find ways of engaging people not currently using the bus.
 - Social Media offers a tool to capture views.
 - Engaging employers as way to gather information.
- Need to unwind the three-year long message from Public Health not to get on to the bus. We need a long-term positive campaign to promote the good news in bus such as low carbon / EV, DRT, free travel for young people. This needs to be pan Government so across Government the mindset is positive towards bus.
- CNPA engagement through full day drop in sessions has worked well. Events that have been badged as active travel have seen a lot of focus on public transport. People want to see transport looked at holistically not by silo and a mode-by-mode approach does not serve the travelling public at all well.