

SCOTTISH BORDERS COUNCIL PETITIONS AND DEPUTATIONS COMMITTEE

MINUTE of Meeting of the PETITIONS AND DEPUTATIONS COMMITTEE held in the Council Chamber, Council Headquarters, Newtown St Boswells, TD6 0SA on Thursday, 10 December, 2015 at 10.00 am

- Present:- Councillors A. J. Nicol (Chairman), S. Bell, D. Paterson, J. Torrance and T. Weatherston
- Apologies:- Councillors D. Parker
Also Present:- Councillors S. Marshall, W. McAteer
- In Attendance:- Service Director Commercial Services (from para 3.5), Strategic Transport Services Manager, Clerk to the Council, Democratic Services Officer (F. Walling).
- Petitioner:- Mr Andy Maybury

1. **MINUTE**

There had been circulated copies of the Minute of 1 October 2015.

DECISION

APPROVED and signed by the Chairman.

2. **THE PETITIONS PROCEDURE**

There had been circulated copies of an extract from the Scottish Borders Council Petitions Procedure which set out the process to be followed at the meeting.

DECISION

NOTED.

3.1 **PETITION: 20/120 BUS SERVICE**

There had been circulated copies of a petition, submitted to the Council on 19 August 2015, entitled "120 Bus Petition". The form was accompanied by a large number of signatures and was submitted by the Chairman of Hawick Community Council. However it was explained that action had been co-ordinated with other Community Councils, with elected Councillors and the local MSP. There had also been circulated copies of a briefing note by the Service Director Neighbourhood Services. The Chairman welcomed Mr Andy Maybury to the meeting to present the petition on behalf of the Principal Petitioner and asked for a round of introductions from Members of the Committee and officers.

- 3.2. On being invited by the Chairman to address the Committee, Mr Maybury explained that the petition had grown out of a number of concerns, some general and some specific to the bus service about which the petition referred. He challenged an often expressed view that one must have a car to survive in the Borders, maintaining that 85 – 90% of the population of the Scottish Borders lived within major settlements but 20% of households did not have a car. Bus services were the key for transport between settlements and, although once considered a public service, were more recently left to be run on a commercial basis. Mr Maybury explained that the No. 20 (later No.120) bus service was a combination of four services: Hawick to Jedburgh; Jedburgh to Kelso; a Jedburgh loop

incorporating Howdenburn; and Hawick loop incorporating Weensland Road. The route was taken over in 2011 by First Borders and operated on a commercial basis resulting in a significant increase in fares and subsequent outcry from users. The Council had then provided a subsidy for some return fares to reduce these to a more reasonable level. However sometime in December 2014/ January 2015 First Borders dropped the service from its standard schedule and said they would pull out. A separate timetable was issued for Services 120 and 20 with temporary financial support from Scottish Borders Council. Mr Maybury alleged that nothing more was communicated to the public domain until late summer when the Council's temporary support ended and the service was threatened. It was at this stage that the petition to save this bus service was started. Mr Maybury outlined that after 17 August a revised bus timetable resulted in the previous 13 Hawick – Jedburgh and 9 Jedburgh – Kelso journeys being reduced to 6 and 3 respectively. After particular engagement with residents in Eckford the timetable was further revised to offer 8 Hawick – Jedburgh and 7 Jedburgh – Kelso journeys but Mr Maybury pointed out that this service was still a reduction from the original. He concluded by saying that the petition asked for the retention of this bus service.

- 3.3 Members welcomed the petition. In response to a request for further clarification about exactly what petitioners were requesting, Mr Maybury said he had not seen any communication from the Council to indicate that the support for the bus service would extend beyond the end of the calendar year. He gave examples of where there was still room for improvement in the service offered and expressed general concern that, where bus services were passed to commercial operators, less-used routes would become unworkable. However he clarified that the main purpose of the petition was that the service be retained. In a reply to a question about passenger numbers on the 120/20 bus service, Mr Maybury believed this to fluctuate significantly from a sole passenger to in excess of twelve. However he pointed out that for a few people the service was their only option for means of travel to work, school, health centre, etc. He was aware and accepted that the provision of bus services was not a statutory service for the Council and that there had to be a judgement in terms of what services could be offered on a limited budget.
- 3.4 Scottish Borders Council's Strategic Transport Services Manager, Mr Timothy Stephenson, gave a response to the petition on behalf of the Service Director Commercial Services. He gave further information on the background to the situation. The bus route in question was operated on a commercial basis by First Borders, with no subsidy from the Council, until January 2015 at which time First Borders decided that they were no longer able to operate the route commercially. The Council stepped in and offered a temporary solution to subsidise the service with First Borders until a re-tender of bus services could be undertaken in the Summer of 2015. It was explained to Councillors at the time that this was a temporary solution for 6 months and budget would be found from existing resources. Following the re-tender it became obvious that the cost of operating this route was far in excess of any available budget. Mr Stephenson explained that one of the Bus Service regulations set by the Traffic Commissioner was that the Council must not run a subsidised service alongside a commercial service. He also clarified that the only bus services whose provision was statutory for the Council were the home to school services. To address the local concern a restructured service 120 (re-numbered 20) was designed using a single bus operating with a reduced timetable and frequency based on passenger numbers gathered from data collected since January 2015. This revised timetable was sent out to communities for consultation in July 2015. As part of the consultation Mr Stephenson had attended a meeting of local residents at Eckford. As a result, and taking into account other feedback, some minor changes were made to the timetable to try to accommodate community requests, particularly around provision to Eckford, within Jedburgh, and Weensland Road, Hawick. The revised service had operated since 17 August 2015. Further timetable changes were introduced on 28 September 2015 – these were small frequency enhancements made largely at the Community Councils' request to accommodate local traveller demand. The service was supported by Demand Responsive Transport and the regulation services to college and schools which could be used by members of the public. Mr Stephenson added that to

date there had been very little negative passenger response to the changes in this service and that the service would continue at least until the end of the current financial year at 31 March 2016. After that date, support from the Council would depend on the amount allocated in the budget for subsidising bus services and competition with other bus routes; the current total budget for subsidised services being £1.9m for the whole of the Borders area. From early in 2016 the Council would begin to engage with Community Councils and with commercial operators in order to determine priorities for services and where money should be spent in terms of subsidised services. At present 30% of bus services in rural areas were commercial and 70% were subsidised. For the Central Borders area these figures were reversed.

- 3.5 In response to Members' questions Mr Stephenson gave further detailed information about the service route and its level of usage. He confirmed that, if the budget was available, there was no intention to reduce the 20/120 service. Mr Maybury thanked Mr Stephenson for the sympathetic response to the petition and complemented the process carried out by the Council. Replying to his question about who was best placed to determine a bus service timetable, Mr Stephenson reiterated that the Council would engage in a big conversation with the public about priorities for services and timetables in Spring 2016. The consultation would include use of VOiCE, the Council's on-line community engagement tool. Mr Stephenson's personal view was that each Community Council should have a 'Transport Champion' with whom the Council could liaise 1:1 about timetables and who could pass on information and requests from the community. The Council would also use 'ambassadors' to provide assistance and collect information from passengers on buses, following the lead and effective use of ambassadors for the Borders railway. With regard to Demand Responsive Transport, Mr Stephenson advised that this service, whereby bookings were taken the previous day, was proving successful for a Hawick – Newcastleton service and also for a route in Kelso. Discussion continued on the size of buses used for certain routes in relation to usage. It was noted that it was more effective to keep the same vehicle on one route and that as well as being limited by vehicle availability size was dependent on peak demand at school times and the requirement for accessibility at all times.
- 3.6 On behalf of Members of the Committee, the Chairman thanked Mr Maybury for his attendance and excellent presentation of the petition, and Mr Stephenson for his helpful and sympathetic response. He also asked Mr Maybury to pass on thanks to the Principal Petitioner and others for raising this petition which had allowed discussion and a clear expansion of the issues. After further discussion Members recognised the importance of effective communication going forward, with the users of bus services, in order to achieve best value in terms of the decision about where the Council's budget for subsidised bus services be directed. It was agreed to refer the petition and associated Minute to the Service Director Commercial Services for his attention.

DECISION

(a) NOTED:-

- (i) the petition calling for the retention of the 20/120 bus service;**
- (ii) that although there was general satisfaction with the current level of this service the timetable could be improved by being extended; and**
- (iii) that from early 2016 the Council would be carrying out public consultation to identify priorities in terms of provision of subsidised bus services.**

(b) AGREED:-

- (i) **to recognise that a bus service was being provided which was satisfactory for some passengers, albeit with some gaps;**
- (ii) **to applaud the Strategic Transport Services' ongoing communication with communities in respect of the 20/120 bus service; and**
- (iii) **to refer the petition to the Service Director Commercial Services with the recommendation that he investigate the necessary mechanism for effective communication with communities, including through Community Councils, to ensure correct identification of priorities, in terms of the provision of subsidised bus services by the Council within the limitations of the budget.**

4. **PETITION CONSIDERED INADMISSIBLE**

There had been circulated copies of a briefing note by the Clerk to the Council advising the Committee of the non-acceptance of a petition received against the siting of a 3G Pitch in Victoria Park, Peebles. The note explained that the petition was received on 26 November 2015. The Executive Committee had agreed at its meeting on 29 September 2015 that Victoria Park was the preferred location for a 3G synthetic pitch in Peebles. Within the terms of the Petitions Procedure agreed at Council, petitions would not be accepted which 'relate to a decision made by the Council or a committee during the preceding six months'. A letter was therefore written to the Principal Petitioner on 2 December 2015 advising that the petition could not be accepted for consideration by the Petitions and Deputations Committee at this time. In the ensuing discussion Councillor Bell advised that he had since been contacted by the Principal Petitioner and had provided information on the process in relation to the proposed 3G Pitch in terms of future decisions on the application for planning consent, consideration of the use of the land by the Peebles Common Good Fund Sub Committee, and provision of capital budget.

**DECISION
NOTED.**

The meeting concluded at 11.35 am