

Proposal to Pilot the Ferintosh Community Bus – Consultation Paper

Summary

Residents of the Ferintosh Community Council (FCC) area, if supportive, will be able to trial a new public and community bus service model. If the trial over 16 months is successful, then the service will provide the possibility of journeys on all seven days and evenings as guided by the requests and needs of residents. ‘Door to door’ journeys on request will be possible. Journeys that link into all the A835 /A9 mainline commercial bus services will be possible. More efficient use of a smaller electric vehicle will be possible. Lower running costs securing more certainty for existing limited services will be possible.

This consultation paper goes into more detail of the model (see below) enabling FCC to ask residents their initial views of this approach (please complete the short questionnaire at the end). FCC is seeking views in time for its monthly meeting at 7pm on Monday 21st September 2020. If residents are broadly supportive, then a more detailed consultation with journeys and timetabling, fare and communication logistics and responses to initial queries will take place within a month. If residents’ feedback is broadly positive from that second consultation then Stage 1 of this pilot will go ahead. A Stage 2 of the pilot is envisaged (see below) and will be the subject of a later consultation.

Introduction and Background

The north Black Isle is home to about 3000 residents living in rural circumstances with very poor access to services as constantly reported by residents and evidenced (lowest decile) in the Scottish Index for Multiple Deprivation. Residents are highly dependent on their own or friends’ vehicles to access work, shops, medical services, entertainment and social and cultural events. The majority of these services are available in Dingwall and Inverness which are anything from a 10 minute to 30minute journey by vehicle. All the current ways of linking residents with services involve the use of a vehicle that is being inefficiently utilised and therefore have questionable sustainability.

For those that have no access to private vehicles, a limited bus service is available and a community car scheme. Even the limited bus service is fragile. The local commuter service to /from Inverness was lost for a few years due to cost savings by The Highland Council (THC) and THC is now faced with even greater financial pressures. THC has also pointed out that its only statutory requirement is to provide bus services to /from schools.

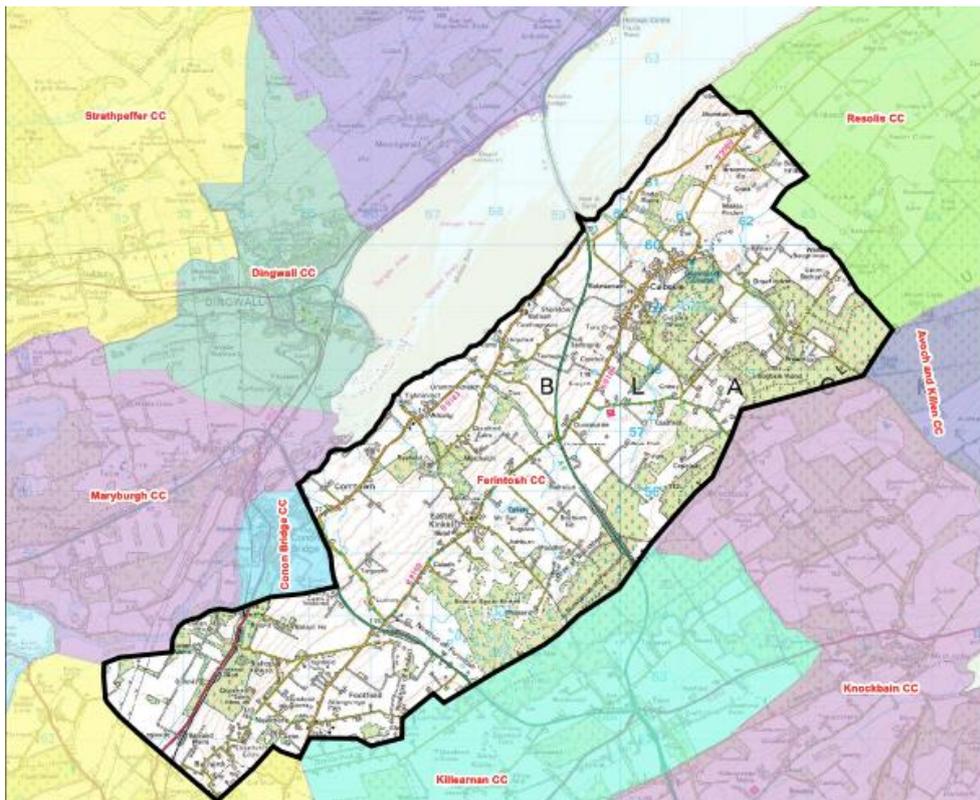
The difficulties of poor access come in a variety of circumstances. We hear from younger residents whose friends at secondary school may live a 20 minute drive away which creates barriers to socialising, especially in the evenings and at the weekend. We hear from elderly residents who find night time driving daunting and, therefore, miss out on theatre, talks and social events. We hear from the more isolated residents who would like to join social groups if only there was a vehicle to collect and deliver a small number of residents. We hear from social groups that would like to organise group trips as days out but have no access to a cost-effective vehicle.

Envisioning a new public transport model for the North Black Isle

A community bus, available days and evenings seven days a week, capable of directly connecting residents’ homes with their places of interest is an obvious solution. Providing an electric vehicle and the appropriate local charging points together with volunteer drivers are the essential ingredients towards an enduring, cost effective and sustainable solution. Finding the resources and funding to both set up and maintain such a system is the key difficulty and barrier.

The one strong transport resource that does exist for residents, particularly for those that live in the area represented by Ferintosh Community Council (see map below), are the frequent commercial bus services flowing along the A9 and the A835.

A partnership has been put together to attempt to both harness that resource advantage and overcome the barrier to providing a community bus. The partnership discussions so far have included HITRANS (Regional Transport Partnership), Stagecoach North Highland, The Highland Council, Ferintosh Community Council, Culbokie Community Trust and Ross-shire Voluntary Action. The partnership has put together a proposed pilot to integrate a local community bus function with mainline commercial services to run from November 2020 to February 2022. The purpose of the pilot will be to test the feasibility of integrating community and commercial needs, to test the ability to meet the current needs of bus users and to test meeting the needs of new users. The funding for this project will come from European sources and the current costs of operating the 22 service.



The Proposed Pilot – the Ferintosh Community Bus

Stage 1:

- HITRANS to lease a vehicle. Initially a diesel vehicle (Mercedes Sprinter 16 seater proposed) but with the intention of transitioning to an 8 seater or similar electric MPV for the duration of the pilot (up to 16 months) once the EV was leased and appropriate charging infrastructure was in place.
- The service would look to replace the current Service 22 (Culbokie -Inverness) which is operated by Stagecoach. Initially the new service would look to retain the morning and evening commute link directly (no interchange at Tore Garage) into Inverness with a more

flexible approach in between the commuter service. Later in the pilot, it is proposed to test the Tore Garage interchange also for the commuter service in order to release more bus availability locally.

- The aim would be for the service to transition to a more flexible service throughout the day with passengers being able to book it to travel anywhere within the Ferintosh Community Council area but also to Tore Garage where they would be able to interchange with any Stagecoach service which runs on the A9 and A835. This would give passengers connections south to Inverness but also north, east and west to Dingwall, Alness, Invergordon etc. and through tickets will be available.
- The exact timetable and geographic coverage of the service to be provided is still to defined and will be the subject of another consultation well in advance of any November start date.
- Once the EV is available to the pilot, it is proposed that after 6pm and at the weekend the vehicle could be made available to the community (those within the FCC area) and operated by volunteers that could help take locals to social activities within the Black Isle. It is envisaged that this sort of service would operate more like a traditional community transport scheme.
- EV charging infrastructure. There are currently Rapid EV chargers at Skiach, Dingwall and Inverness. The service could be operated using these facilities but for it to be effective given the range of the proposed model size for the pilot, the preference would be for a new rapid charger either at Tore or Culbokie or worst case for a fast charger at Culbokie.

Stage 2 (will be the subject of a future consultation)

- If Stage 1 progresses satisfactorily, a proposal will come forward to expand the scheme into integrating the 21 service (to and from Dingwall). The consultation for this Stage 2 will need to include the residents of all the community council areas served by the 21 service.
 - The wider geographic coverage and capacity will enable the testing of an app which will enhance the demand responsiveness of the integrated bus system.
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Key Questions:

1. Would you support (yes or no) this approach to changing public and community bus provision?
2. Are you a 'frequent' (at least once per week) OR 'occasional' (less than once per week) OR 'non' user?
3. Would the existence of the Ferintosh Community Bus change ('up' or 'down' or 'no') your usage?
4. Any comments welcome.

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Please return to Bruce Morrison, Ferintosh Community Council, on ferintoshcc30@gmail.com or phone on 877127.
