

Report to Partnership Meeting – 3rd April 2009

STRATEGY DEVELOPMENT AND DELIVERY

Quality Partnership Opportunities in the Highlands and Islands

PURPOSE OF REPORT

To advise members of an opportunity that exists to develop statutory quality bus partnerships in Argyll & Bute, Highland, Moray and Orkney that would secure a partnership between bus operators, local authorities, HITRANS and Transport Scotland to support the delivery of high quality bus services in the Highlands and Islands featuring modern buses, real time information, improved bus stop infrastructure and bus priority measures.

BACKGROUND

A statutory Quality Partnership is a Scheme whereby local authorities provide particular facilities, in the whole or part of their area, and bus operators of local services who wish to use the facilities must undertake to provide local services of a particular quality standard when using them.

Such partnerships would normally be on a corridor by corridor basis, whereby the investment in infrastructure facilities provision, and the provision of local services of that standard, will improve the quality of local services in the scheme area by bringing benefits to passengers using those services. A Quality Partnership Scheme is a Statutory Scheme with its process, form and content prescribed by the Transport (Scotland) Act 2001 and can be a development of existing voluntary quality bus corridor partnership agreements that might have been established in the past.

While there have been some informal voluntary arrangements established in the past to mark investment in services in the Highlands and Islands (outlined in more detail in the local authority area sections below) there has been little formal acknowledgement of the substantial investment made in recent years to improve the quality of bus services and infrastructure. HITRANS identified the need to look at statutory quality partnerships as a way of building on the foundation of good services that has been established as a result of investment by operators, local authorities through enhanced contracts and HITRANS through capital investment and bus route development schemes.

The development of a quality partnership document was included in the Road Based Passenger study taking the network of upgraded bus services to Inverness Airport as its basis. Having commenced preliminary discussions with Stagecoach about adopting this document it became apparent that there is a real appetite to extend the coverage of any Statutory Quality Partnership to cover a much larger number of local services operated by Stagecoach. Further discussions have revealed that West Coast Motors share this desire and would wish to equally move towards a formal quality partnership for the services they provide in Argyll and Bute.

ARGYLL AND BUTE COUNCIL AREA

Argyll and Bute have not formally introduced a Quality Partnership as a voluntary document but the Council do have an informal arrangement with Oban & District Buses in which certain guarantees were exchanged on either side with respect to quality of vehicles to be used on certain local services within Oban (both tendered and commercial) and from the local authority side where there was to be improved infrastructure and information provision.

In recent years there has been substantial partnership working involving Argyll and Bute Council, HITRANS and bus operators in Argyll and Bute that has delivered a step change in quality of bus accessibility and interchange facilities. Information provision has been significantly improved both in terms of static publicity and real time information. Again although not formalised this progress underlines the real value of partnership working to achieve lasting improvement in the delivery of bus services. More than 20 new accessible buses have entered service in Argyll and Bute since 2004 transforming the fleet profile of local buses. There has also been substantial investment in new bus stop infrastructure as well as the investment in improved passenger information.

With the large scale of investment made by bus operators, Argyll and Bute Council, and HITRANS in recent years there is significant potential to establish formal Statutory Quality Partnerships in the area.

Preliminary discussions have been held with West Coast Motors with a view to establishing a Quality Partnership to cover a number of their routes in Argyll and Bute. The operator is very positive about having a Statutory Quality Partnership introduced as this would formalise and underline the level of investment that has taken place in recent years. Should a SQP be formalised for routes operated by West Coast Motors the signatories would probably be West Coast Motors, Argyll and Bute Council, HITRANS and the Traffic Commissioner for Scotland.

HIGHLAND

There are no statutory partnerships between Highland Council and its local operators. However the Council has been active in formulating partnerships with local operators over some of the major corridors. Introduced in March 1998, a partnership between Stagecoach and the Council set out a statement of intent as an “umbrella” under which more specific projects could be developed. Stagecoach’s involvement in this area was on fare levels, ticketing initiatives, limit on timetable changes, improving vehicle standards, providing low floor vehicles and customer care.

Record investment levels have taken place in the bus network serving much of the Highland Council area in recent years. This has only been possible through a partnership culture that has developed and been fostered. The key players in this have been a number of bus operators, Highland Council and HITRANS. This approach has delivered real benefits to bus passengers in terms of quality and accessibility of buses and investment in interchange facilities. Investment in real time passenger information will also improve passengers’ journey experience and we hope this will be an important tool in encouraging more people to use the bus. Although not formalised into a Quality Partnership this progress underlines the real value of partnership working to achieve lasting improvement in the delivery of bus services and recent annual increases in bus use underline this.

Since 2004 more than 110 new accessible buses have entered service in the Highland Council area. This has transformed the fleet profile indeed this is exemplified by the current average vehicle age of buses operated by Stagecoach in Inverness being less than four years old. There has also been substantial investment in new bus stop infrastructure including the refurbishment of bus stations in Inverness and Aviemore in recent years.

With the large scale of investment made by bus operators, Highland Council and HITRANS in recent years there is significant potential to establish formal Statutory Quality Partnerships in the area.

Preliminary discussions have been held with Stagecoach with a view to establishing a Quality Partnership to cover a number of their routes in Highland. The operator is very positive about having a Statutory Quality Partnership introduced as this would formalise and underline the level of investment that has taken place in recent years.

The introduction of a Statutory Quality Partnership at this time would support the aspirations of Highland Council, HITRANS and Stagecoach for the introduction of Park and Ride facilities supported by bus priority measures in Inverness. A SQP would give the commitment of all partners to support such investment in infrastructure through continued investment in fleet and marketing.

Should a SQP be formalised for routes operated by Stagecoach in Highland the signatories would probably be Stagecoach, Highland Council, HITRANS and the Traffic Commissioner for Scotland.

MORAY

There is no statutory or voluntary partnership between The Moray Council and local operators. In common with other councils in the region Moray has delivered a number of projects that contain the types of initiative which in other areas have been formalised as voluntary quality partnerships.

The Moray Council's contracted network of local bus services has been branded as Network M and is delivered by a fleet of DDA compliant buses operated by a number of bus operators. This is probably a unique situation in Scotland and Moray Council are to be commended for having achieved this while also making seat belts a contractual requirement and the Council has also been active in promoting the roll out of CCTV on buses and in bus shelters.

In common with other local authorities across the region Moray Council have delivered a great deal of partnership working involving the Council, HITRANS and bus operators that has delivered a step change in quality of bus accessibility and interchange facilities. Information provision has been significantly improved both in terms of static publicity and real time information. Although not formalised as a document this progress underlines the real value of partnership working to achieve lasting improvement in the delivery of bus services. More than 40 new accessible buses have entered service in Moray since 2004 transforming the fleet profile of local buses. There has also been substantial investment in new bus stop infrastructure as well as the investment in improved passenger information.

With the large scale of investment made by bus operators, Moray Council and HITRANS in recent years there is significant potential to establish formal Statutory Quality Partnerships in the area.

Preliminary discussions have been held with Stagecoach with a view to establishing a Quality Partnership to cover a number of their routes in Moray. The operator is very positive about having a Statutory Quality Partnership introduced as this would formalise and underline the level of investment that has taken place in recent years. Should a SQP be formalised for routes operated by Stagecoach Bluebird the signatories would probably be Stagecoach, Moray Council, HITRANS and the Traffic Commissioner for Scotland.

ORKNEY ISLANDS

Orkney Islands Council has not established a voluntary quality partnership in the past although substantial progress has been made in improving the islands' bus network in recent years. The pace of change in Orkney has been particularly evident in the improvement in the fleet of buses that provide the core network of local bus services. The entire local bus network is now operated by modern easy access low floor buses having previously been served by aged coaches which formed the backbone of the local bus network as well as providing school and tour service duties.

Orkney has also seen substantial change in the quality of bus stop infrastructure since 2002. A partnership of Orkney Islands Council and HITRANS delivered the new Kirkwall Travel Centre which opened in 2008 and gives Kirkwall an exceptional bus station incorporating tourist information and real time passenger information. A similar partnership of OIC and HITRANS also saw Stromness gain a travel centre in 2006 while HITRANS funding has helped treble the number of bus shelters available for passengers waiting at bus stops in the islands.

Preliminary discussions have been held with Stagecoach with a view to establishing a Quality Partnership to cover a number of their routes in Orkney. The operator is very positive about having a Statutory Quality Partnership introduced as this would formalise and underline the level of investment that has taken place in recent years. Should a SQP be formalised for routes operated by Stagecoach in Orkney the signatories would probably be Stagecoach, Orkney Islands Council, HITRANS and the Traffic Commissioner for Scotland.

RECOMMENDATION

1. Members are asked to note the report.
2. Members are asked to approve further investigation of statutory quality partnership opportunities by officers.

Report by: Ranald Robertson
Designation: Partnership Manager
Date: 26th March 2009