



RELBUS ANNUAL REPORT

Highlights of 2015-2016

STATEMENT FROM THE CHAIR

The Rural East Lothian Bus Users (RELBUS) group provides an established forum for local views on bus operations and a vehicle for those concerns to be discussed, analysed and passed on as appropriate to the council and operators.

At last year's AGM we were given an interesting and amusing talk by committee member Harry Barker about his involvement with buses over many years. Harry is the chairman of the Omnibus Society whose members include both enthusiasts and operators.

This year only two ordinary meetings have taken place following the delay in holding the last AGM and on the basis that we meet only if business dictates. They have been attended by Community Council members and others interested in local bus issues. The big issue of the year has been the proposed withdrawal by First of its services in East Lothian. This caused alarm bells to ring with real worries among many bus users about whether they will continue to have a service. It is a matter on which we have concentrated over the summer and was the principal agenda item at our June meeting. We know now that services will continue and I am grateful for all the efforts made by the council, Bus Users Scotland, the Scottish Government and the operators to ensure that this happened. We are indeed fortunate here in East Lothian to now have what is probably the best organised rural bus network in Scotland.

I have decided for personal reasons to stand down as RELBUS chairman at the 2016 AGM. As outgoing chairman I would like to thank all those who regularly attend and contribute to our meetings and who promote the RELBUS cause in the wider world. My resignation comes at a time when it is opportune to review the working arrangements of RELBUS in the light of the service improvements now being put in place and declining attendance at our meetings. The latter may be partly due to the existence of East Lothian Council's Bus Forum which covers most of the issues with which we are concerned.

This year's report is presented under the headings of our principal activities over the year.

Barry Turner, chairman of Rural East Lothian Bus Users
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Input to the East Lothian Council Bus Forum

The Bus Forum brings together a range of interests including RELBUS, Bus Users Scotland, operators, Community Councils and council officers. There have been two meetings of the Bus Forum in the period covered by this report. RELBUS is invited to put forward agenda items for discussion. Matters put forward have included community transport, bus services in new residential development, bus/rail connectivity and particular routing issues raised with us by members of the public. Updates have been given by the council and operators and action points identified.

East Lothian Bus Passenger Charter

Concerns had been expressed about a lack of consistency amongst the operators in respect to the provisions of the charter. This was raised by RELBUS at the last meeting of the Bus Forum and the council agreed that a special meeting be arranged to review the operation and effectiveness of the charter. The meeting took place on August 4th. The overall assessment was that the charter is working well with its delivery likely to be aided by the service changes now taking place. Actions were identified in respect of timetable information at stops, easier access for buses to some bus stops and the creation of main bus stop hubs in each major town. It was also proposed that in order to assist drivers, advice be provided inside buses encouraging passengers to hail the bus they need at stops served by a number of routes.

Community Transport

Progress on providing transport to the three key rural settlements (Humbie, Garvald and Oldhamstocks) identified as being without any kind of provision has been disappointing. The innovative West Lothian Taxibus service was discussed at a RELBUS meeting and it was recognised that this might be a good model to be adopted in East Lothian. The council has been investigating something similar and the good news is that a taxi-based community bus service is about to be introduced for Humbie. We await proposals for the other two settlements.

Bus/rail connectivity

East Lothian cries out for better bus/rail connectivity. The Community Rail Partnership is acting as the go-between in this matter and foresees connectivity being introduced at Longniddry and North Berwick, hopefully in the not too distant future. Dunbar is much more difficult to achieve as it does not have a clock-face rail timetable.

There are various matters, some legal, which have to be addressed in order that effective and robust connectivity can be achieved. The Equality Act (2010) and its implementation will have far reaching effects on bus/rail connectivity and it is expected that any new connectivity will be disability and equality compliant. Failure to ensure this is the case will result in breaches of that Act and potentially legal action taken against whoever is deemed to be at fault. Unfortunately it is becoming a recognised practice for cases to be brought claiming discrimination and organisations such as The Omnibus Society and Bus Users UK have both suffered in this regard over the past year with complainers attempting to withdraw from the action if an out of court settlement of a few hundred pounds is made.

Another important aspect is that to achieve robust connections, both trains and buses should wherever possible run to a clock-face timetable, this being another side effect of The Equality Act (2010) where failure to do so could result in those with Asperger's syndrome or autism, where regular repeated patterns are important also claiming discrimination.

Meeting with representatives from East Riding of Yorkshire Council

Demonstrating the reach of RELBUS and its activities, we were asked by representatives of the East Riding of Yorkshire Council if we would meet with them to offer help and advice on how to set up an effective bus users group and facilitate meaningful passenger engagement. We extended the involvement to Lothian Buses, Bus Users Scotland and ScotRail and a meeting was hosted by Bus Users Scotland at their Edinburgh office. There were some helpful exchanges and the meeting provided an opportunity for RELBUS to promote its initiatives, notably the Bus Passenger Charter.

The withdrawal of First's services from East Lothian

Following the Competition and Marketing Authority's decision to release First from undertakings affecting its bus operations across south and south east Scotland, the announced withdrawal of services in East Lothian came as no surprise to us given the apparent Cinderella nature of these services. RELBUS has had ongoing contact with the council and Bus Users Scotland culminating in a far-reaching discussion of the issues at our May meeting attended by Iain Gray MSP. At that time no information was available regarding replacement services but there was a desire to reassure bus users that every effort was being made to put them in place. As a consequence RELBUS issued a press statement which included updates and reassurances from both Iain Gray and Councillor Michael Veitch and this formed the basis of a lengthy feature in the East Lothian Courier.

There were sighs of relief all round when Lothian Buses announced that it would be taking over the trunk services between Edinburgh and North Berwick and Dunbar under the banner of East Coast Buses, as well as the two relinquished depots. RELBUS expressed its concern that the locally important 108 service between Musselburgh and Haddington was not included but local operator, Prentice Coaches, subsequently made it known that it would run a service between these points on a commercial basis.

RELBUS is grateful for all the efforts made to ensure that bus users were not left high and dry but it remains concerned that they were faced with the prospect for the second time in four years and it raises questions about how bus service provision is currently organised and safeguarded. Fortunately these questions are now in the mind of the new Transport Minister Humza Yousaf who became involved with the withdrawal issue and who will, no doubt, want to ensure that nothing of this nature happens elsewhere. Since Mr Yousaf has apparently expressed interest in bus issues generally we took the opportunity of sending him a short note on our priorities for change and improvement, i.e. integration, innovation, information and involvement.

ABOUT RELBUS

The Rural East Lothian Bus Users group (RELBUS) was formed in 2012 to provide a voice for bus passengers in East Lothian. We are simply a group of volunteers who are concerned about the quality of our local bus services.

Our aims are to liaise with the bus service providers to:

- improve the reliability and frequency of the local bus services
- promote and encourage the use of the local bus services
- negotiate reasonable fares/season tickets/discount cards for local people

We represent people living in and travelling to rural East Lothian, whether they live work or play in the area. We focus on issues affecting rural areas as these generally have the poorest quality of service, but speak up for all bus users in East Lothian. We welcome new members. Email info@relbus.org.uk to find out more.