

Council to look at improving bus services in the west of the city

The City of Edinburgh Council will look at ways of improving bus services serving the rural west of the city by early next year, as commuters say months of unreliable and cancelled services has been “devastating” for the communities left stranded.

The plan, which will involve reviewing the efficiency of all council-subsidised services across the city, comes a year after an urgent plea from people in Ratho for better public transport.

Timetables were slashed last year due to driver shortages, with the number of daily services halved in the case of the 20 Chesser to Ratho and the 63 between Balerno and Queensferry.

Both services, as well as the 68 circular route through South Gyle, Drumbrae and Corstorphine changed hands from First to McGills in September and things went “from bad to worse,” Stacey O’Flaherty from Ratho Community Council’s bus working group said.

She said buses often don’t turn up until after 10am despite being timetabled to start three hours earlier, with services

regularly delayed or cancelled leaving locals “stranded having to walk miles of country roads often in the dark late at night”.

She added: “The effects this has on our local community is devastating.

“People are losing jobs, can’t get to work or college, people having to pay huge taxis fares to get home.”

One local said “more and more people” were being forced to use their cars as a result.

Ms O’Flaherty said public money was being “wasted on services that nobody wants,” pointing out the 20 did not currently meet the needs of the local community which “doesn’t need a bus beyond the Gyle” but rather “local connectivity to Ratho Station and Gyle and a direct service to the city centre”.

Her concerns are not new however; last September she told the Transport and Environment Committee the 20 was “not fit for purpose” and often there were buses running through the village “with just a handful of people on them”.

The council acknowledged there is “ongoing local dissatisfaction with some supported bus service provision in the city, most notably the Ratho community”.

It has brought in consultants to advise on how the £1.5 million it spends on subsidised buses each year can be used most effectively, by exploring alternative route options and other potential changes before retendering contracts. A report said this would be done before the end of the year for councillors to approve in January 2024.

But Ms O’Flaherty questioned why this was only happening now and not a year ago when concerns were raised.

Conservative MSP for Lothian Sue Webber said: “I was disappointed to see little progress had actually been made in

seeking a solution for the people living in Ratho.

“I have met with residents from Ratho and listened to their harrowing stories about how having no reliable or suitable bus link impacts their lives. If this was happening to people living elsewhere in the city then I am quite certain more would have been done by now.

“If the Labour-run council are serious with their ambitions to get people out of cars and into public transport then they really need to up their game. “

‘This just really isn’t acceptable’

Ratho residents have told the Local Democracy Reporting Service how the unreliability of buses has affected their day-to-day lives.

Anne Thomson said she used to ride the bus “when we had a reliable service”.

However she recently “decided that I should think of the environment and leave the car at home”.

She said: “I waited at the Bridge Inn stop for the bus which should have been there at 9.05am. It eventually arrived at 9.25am which meant that by the time I caught another connection at The Gyle I arrived at the bus station too late for the bus I intended catching, result I missed the meeting.”

Buses in the village are “late to the tune of between 10-30 minutes” every day, Angela Black said.

“I have children to get home for and this just really isn’t acceptable, the current route that the 20 takes really isn’t convenient for most people in the village. The re-routing of the route to include Inglston Park and Ride was wholly unnecessary and has added time on to people’s journey.

“More and more people in the village are being forced to use their cars.”

Marysia Ferguson added: “The main issue that needs addressed urgently is that there is no reliable service for young people and/or vulnerable people which puts them at unnecessary risk.

“My husband has a disability and requires treatment at the Western General every six weeks. He cannot reliably use any bus service from Ratho to make his hospital appointments and receive his treatment on time.

“On more than one occasion, his health has been put at risk when he has missed his treatment because a bus didn’t turn up.”

‘Not delivering services to the best of our abilities’

Council transport manager Stuart Lowrie acknowledged there had been “a lack of speed of progress in resolving this”.

“There’s definitely a bit of a resource issue in progress here,” he told the Transport and Environment Committee on Thursday (August 18).

“There’s certainly no satisfaction from me and my team in not delivering services to the best of our abilities.”

He said the timescale to have more reliable and frequent services in place by early next year was “tight” but added “it is possible”.

The existing contract with McGills are due to end at the end of this month, however a report to the committee said the operator has “agreed to continue to operate their contracted services until the tender process is complete and new contracts are awarded”.

Lib Dem group leader Kevin Lang said: “It is a year since Ratho Community Council bus users group were before this committee and it was known that the current contracts were up at the end of this month.

“What I don’t understand is why only now are we appointing a consultant to undertake a review.

“These deadlines were known about. The pressure on colleagues were known about.”

The council’s review of all subsidised services, which also include the number 13 between Findlay Gardens and Quarry Retail Park, will look to “resolve reliability issues and explore whether accessibility and connectivity issues elsewhere in the city can be enhanced”.

The report said as part of this, bus provision could be reintroduced in the Willowbrae area following withdrawal of the 69 four years ago.

To assist with the review, Jacobs consultancy have been appointed by the council, whose activities will include:

- Reviewing the current supported services contracted by the Council, identifying challenges and opportunities and assessing current levels of performance
- Developing recommendations for tender based on the challenges and opportunities identified
- Developing alternative route / service options
- Making recommendations on route options that perform best in addressing transport planning objectives while working within available funding – this will include consideration of retention of existing routes, amendments to currently supported routes, and exploring new route opportunities (either wholly new or combinations of previous services)

by Donald Turvill, Local Democracy Reporter.

