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ABERDEEN
CITY COUNCIL

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Dear Chris,

I write to you to express my concerns on behalf of my constituents in respect of FirstAberdeen's intention to withdraw services from Kingswells at the end of the year. I would like this letter to be considered as part of the formal consultation you are currently carrying out.

Impact Of Withdrawal Of Service

As you are aware, Kingswells is a village of 1900 homes with an adult population of 3500. The distance from the north of Kingswells to the south is just over two miles and the distance from the north of Kingswells to the Park & Ride site is 1.75 miles.

Were Kingswells to be left without a service, the village would struggle to maintain its local shopping centre and other local businesses. In addition local residents would experience considerable challenges getting to and from work. This could very well result in people moving out of the area and difficulties being experienced in attracting new residents to Kingswells. I cannot underestimate the social and economic impact of this.

To give you some idea of the impact withdrawing the X40 and 11 services would have on residents, I will briefly summarise a number of concerns which have already been raised with me:-

- Parents who do not live within walking distance of the Park & Ride and do not drive will not be able to drop their children off at school or get to work.
- Parents will not be able to collect their children from school on their way home from work. The same comment was also made in respect of grandparents who live outwith Kingswells and collect children from school.

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- For those who can access the Park & Ride, morning peak time services X18 and X17 are often full by the time they get here, so the withdrawal of the X40 would create challenges getting to work.
- Teachers, childcare staff and nursing staff will be unable to get to work at Kingswells School, Great Western Nursery and After School Club and Kingsmead Nursing Home.
- Similarly, some of the local shops may also be at risk for the same reason.
- Staff at Aberdeen Royal Infirmary are not permitted to park on site and will be unable to get to or from work.
- Patients will be unable to attend appointments at Woodend Hospital, Aberdeen Royal Infirmary and the Health Village at Frederick Street.
- Residents in the north of Kingswells will not be able to access the GP surgery, Pharmacy or local shops, never mind shopping and other facilities in the city centre.
- Disabled residents will become housebound without a bus service.

In summary, geographical distance, social need and economic impact are the key issues here. First is a company which prospers from its near monopoly of services within Aberdeen and I believe that it is simply unfair of them to look at one service in isolation and to cherry pick routes on what should be a public service.

I also fear the wider repercussions if this decision goes unchallenged as it would open the door to First withdrawing from other less profitable routes across the city in order to maximise their profitability with no consideration of social need. Such circumstances would put unimaginable pressure on council finances, were these to fall to Aberdeen City Council to deliver.

People Don't Believe The Numbers

A number of concerns have also been raised regarding passenger numbers which have not been independently verified, but do seem to be exceptionally low, given the high peak time usage.

It has been once again brought to my attention that many passengers are now using the phone app as their ticket and I'm told these are not being recorded. Similarly, season passes are not always recorded and the same goes for senior citizen cards. I'm told the ticket machine was "broken" recently on three separate occasions in the same week, according to one senior citizen. The perception is that this was perhaps more than coincidental. Others have raised similar concerns. Taking this particular incident out of the equation, whether failure to record passenger numbers is down to driver error or indifference is unknown, but it really matters when considering passenger numbers on a lesser used service. I have in the past raised these concerns with David Phillips who assured me that this was not happening on a regular basis, but anecdotal evidence suggests otherwise.

Other concerns have been raised about destinations printed on tickets. To give just one example, a lady boarding at Wellside had her boarding point printed as Fairley Road. On the same day she stated her destination on the return journey but rather than Wellside, her destination was printed as one of the Lang Stracht stops. In both cases she would not have been recorded as travelling round the village. I believe this lady kept her tickets, others may not have.

Concerns have also been raised about the methodology used for counting passengers on the service. If indeed only passengers boarding at Kingswells stops are being counted, true numbers are not being fairly represented. For instance I board the X40 at Tesco, Langstracht and would appear to be being counted on my return journey, but not my outward journey. Extrapolated, surely this suggests true numbers to be at least double those provided by FirstAberdeen? In addition, I believe passengers boarding on Lang Stracht (both directions) are considered "incidental" and, I believe not being counted. However, they do clearly contribute towards the revenue being raised by the X40 service.

There are concerns that unreliable statistics in respect of passenger numbers may be being used to justify the intended withdrawal of this service. Nobody is denying that passenger numbers are low during off-peak hours, but peak hours are busy and it is felt that FirstAberdeen are keen to cease the service because it is less lucrative to run than some of their other services.

The profitability or otherwise of this service is reliant on accurate record keeping and my constituents have no faith in the reliability of the figures provided. I would therefore ask that the Council request an independent audit not only of the figures provided, but also the methodology employed to collate those figures.

Recent Changes

Over the past five years bus services have been ever changing in Kingswells. Originally we had the 14/15 and the 40 both serving the area prior to the introduction of the X40/11 combination as a single service. Routes have changed, frequencies have changed and reliability has reduced, all of which has inevitably led to reducing passenger numbers.

Prior to Duncan Cameron's departure from FirstAberdeen, passenger numbers were up on the single service when compared to the separate 14/15 and 40 services. The service was covering costs at that time and First were seeking to grow patronage.

Since then various route changes but, more particularly, the reduction in frequency and sporadic nature of the service has impacted negatively on passenger numbers. I personally struggle to reach any conclusion other than that FirstAberdeen appear to have been running the service down. The vast majority of my constituents agree.

With regard to the poor timekeeping on the X40 route, this is something FirstAberdeen have failed to address despite numerous tweaks to the route. I've had countless complaints over the past two or three years and have first hand experience of this myself when using this service.

As failure to comply with a registered timetable is a matter of concern to the Scottish Traffic Commissioner, I have brought the matter to her attention and trust you can liaise with her on this matter.

Next Steps

My constituents seek only one outcome from this process and that is the continuation of a bus service which covers the entire village. Whilst the X17 and X18 services are welcome additions to those who live within walking distance of the Park & Ride or who can drive there, these services are inaccessible to the majority of Kingswells residents.

It is fully understood that three options exist to deliver this outcome, namely First's continuance of the current bus services, Stagecoach taking over the village service or a subsidised service falling under the auspices of Aberdeen City Council.

There are no specific preferences from these three options, but a few points were raised. Should a subsidised service be put in place, it would need to coincide timing-wise with the X17/X18 services to make it usable. Some sort of through ticketing would be needed in order to keep bus travel affordable.

Correspondence from FirstAberdeen appears to suggest they are actively looking to Aberdeen City Council to subsidise this service. It would therefore be somewhat unpalatable for a subsidy to be handed to FirstAberdeen in view of the manner in which they have disregarded the needs of a whole community. I would also have concerns that the likelihood of other services being withdrawn elsewhere in the city might be heightened by such an approach. I would therefore request that any subsidised service in respect of this route be put out to competitive tender.

I thank you for your consideration of the matters raised in this letter.

Yours sincerely


Steve Delaney