

Agenda Item	6
Report No	CIA/29/25

The Highland Council

Committee: City of Inverness Area

Date: 18 August 2025

Report Title: Bus Services in Inverness City

Report By: Assistant Chief Executive - Place

1 Purpose/Executive Summary

- 1.1 This report updates Members on recent changes to the Inverness City bus network and the background to them and invites comments on the desired future shape of the network, within the legislative and financial constraints on its design.

2 Recommendations

- 2.1 Members are asked to:-

- i. **Note** the recent changes to the Inverness bus service network;
- ii. **Comment** on the priority needs for bus services in the City; and
- iii. **Agree** to passenger needs being researched, in collaboration with Stagecoach, to support the developing Bus Service Improvement Partnership.

3 Implications

- 3.1 **Resource** – There are no resource implications arising directly from this report for bus service operation. It is intended that the action recommended will support the continuation and further development of commercially viable bus services in the City. A cost of around £15,000 is anticipated for a study, to be shared between partners.
- 3.2 **Legal** – There are no legal implications arising directly from this report.
- 3.3 **Risk** – There are no legal implications arising directly from this report.

3.4 **Health and Safety (risks arising from changes to plant, equipment, process, or people)** – There are no health and safety implications.

3.5 **Gaelic** – There are no Gaelic implications.

4 Impacts

4.1 In Highland, all policies, strategies or service changes are subject to an integrated screening for impact for Equalities, Poverty and Human Rights, Children's Rights and Wellbeing, Climate Change, Islands and Mainland Rural Communities, and Data Protection. Where identified as required, a full impact assessment will be undertaken.

4.2 Considering impacts is a core part of the decision-making process and needs to inform the decision-making process. When taking any decision, Members must give due regard to the findings of any assessment.

4.3 This is an update report and therefore an impact assessment is not required. However, an impact assessment will be undertaken as part of the research and work to consider passenger needs across the City.

5 Background

5.1 For many years, Stagecoach have operated most of the City bus routes in Inverness on a commercial basis: that is to say that the operator makes the commercial decisions and takes the commercial risk, so they are not under contract to the Council and the Council has no power to determine how they operate. Historically, one or two evening services have been under contract to the Council, but since 2023 they have all been commercially operated.

5.2 In 2023, electric buses were introduced on all the city routes, improving service reliability compared to the older vehicles as well as giving environmental benefits.

5.3 Bus operators are required by law to give 42 days' notice of new services, changes or cancellations to the Traffic Commissioner, and a prior 28 days' notice to the Council(s) where the routes operate. (These periods may be reduced in certain unforeseen circumstances). Although the 28-day period is often referred to as a "consultation", in practice any consultation is limited to details of the proposals, as the decision-making remains with the operator and the Council has no power to object. This period does however give an opportunity, subject to a budget being available, to obtain a price to continue a service under contract to the Council or to seek an alternative operator.

6 Recent network changes

- 6.1 At the start of 2025, Stagecoach withdrew their service between the City centre and Ness Castle, leading to the in-house bus operation Highland Council Buses, introducing a replacement service.
- 6.2 In July 2025, Stagecoach made much more widespread changes, which included:-
- Frequency changes (increased between Culloden and the City centre, but decreased on several other routes);
 - Withdrawal of Service 4 (City Centre – Kingsmills – Raigmore Hospital – Milton of Leys – Holm Dell – Lochardil – City Centre) and Service 7 (same route in opposite direction); and
 - Extensions were made to the Hilton route (Service 5), hourly to each of Drakies and Raigmore Hospital; UHI Campus and Inverness Retail Park and Holm Dell, partially replacing Services 4 and 7 in some areas. Lochardil, however, was left with no Stagecoach service at all.

These changes resulted in a net reduction of four buses operating their city services. Seven electric single deckers have been moved to elsewhere in the Stagecoach network, with electric double deckers being brought in to cover three bus workings.

- 6.3 Highland Council Buses were able to introduce a service for Lochardil, albeit on a more limited basis than the previous Stagecoach service, and this has been warmly welcomed. However, significant concerns have been expressed about loss of services and longer distances to walk to bus stops elsewhere in the city, most notably (but not only) in the Crown/Kingsmills area. Following representations from Ward Members, a Highland Council Buses service has been announced for that area, for a trial period of 6 months, taking in the City centre, Raigmore Hospital, retail parks and the Wester Inshes area. This is due to commence on 4 August.
- 6.4 The operating cost of the new Lochardil service, before taking account of fares revenue, has been calculated at £120,430 per year, and that of the Kingsmills service at £22,577 for the 6-month trial period. The carryings and financial performance of both services will be monitored.

7 Future considerations

- 7.1 Stagecoach have informally told the Council that they are intending that the extensions they have made to the Hilton route will help to support its viability. However, the changes do highlight a need to research the extent to which the services are meeting passenger needs and desires, in collaboration with Stagecoach, to help design a future service pattern and promote growth in bus usage. This work would fit within the objectives of the developing Bus Service Improvement Partnership.

7.2 The focus of this study would be on the southern sector of the City, covering the areas of Service 5 and the Highland Council Buses routes, but could potentially extend to the rest of the city. It should engage with major employers (NHS Highland have already been in touch with the Council's transport team about increasing attractiveness of buses for their own staff, and a similar project with Council staff is being developed under the Delivery Plan) as well as community representatives. Issues to be examined would include:-

- key destinations;
- journey times, accessibility of bus stops, directness of routes;
- times of day and frequencies;
- fares;
- availability of information; and
- reliability, and perception of reliability

and the extent to which each of these are either incentives or barriers to bus use. It is recognised that not all aspirations will be able to be met, but it is hoped that this work would inform the development of a more sustainable and stable bus network.

7.3 Early discussions have been held with a potential consultant, and an indicative cost of a study is around £15,000. Stagecoach have indicated that they would be willing to contribute to the cost, and a small contribution from HiTrans may also be possible.

7.4 Members are invited to comment on the effectiveness of the existing network, priorities for potential improvement, and aspects which should be included in a study of passenger needs.

Designation: Assistant Chief Executive - Place

Date: 30 July 2025

Author: David Summers, Principal Transport Officer

Background Papers: None

Appendices: None