

## **FIRSTGROUP/SB HOLDINGS REMEDY REVIEW**

### **Summary of hearing with Age Scotland on 11 December 2015**

#### **Introduction**

1. Age Scotland said it was a charity dedicated to enabling everyone to make the most of later life, believing that no matter where people lived they should be able to reach key services, friends and family at reasonable cost, in reasonable time and with reasonable ease. The charity focused on all areas including housing, infrastructure and transport. Through its work it had identified that a lack of such facilities could lead to feelings of loneliness and isolation; which in turn had been proven to have long term impact on health which was equivalent in effect to lifelong smoking, and even increased risk of dementia. Age Scotland was keen to mitigate any potential detrimental effect on people by ensuring that bus operators took these factors into consideration before implementing any alterations to existing services.
2. The charity said that a key consideration that needed addressing during the CMA's review of the undertakings was the availability of service provision, particularly outside of peak hours from 10am to 5pm when older people generally preferred to use bus services.
3. Age Scotland noted that results from its Still Waiting campaign highlighted that even though the elderly got free services with a card for national entitlement for travel, it was used by people in urban areas more than in rural areas. It was noted that there was a variation in service provision within rural communities that might possibly contribute to this. For example Age Scotland had identified issues where a claimed service for a village required a long walk along a B road that was not provided with a pavement. It was not aware of any mechanism the local authority might have used to specify those routes in order to deal with such issues. Although Age Scotland participated in certain key messages with the local authorities, it did not have any involvement in terms of deciding the best use of limited resources and in selecting which routes should be supported.

## Operator behaviour and fares

4. Age Scotland argued that although the initial outlay in terms of paying for costs and services might seem difficult for local authorities, there was a positive outcome particularly in terms of perhaps reduced costs to the NHS. The charity found that with better access to bus services, people were happier, healthier and better able to widen their nutritional intake with access to more variety in shopping.
5. Age Scotland stated that there was a sense of major differences in bus services between the cities. In Edinburgh there appeared to be more accessible buses in terms of drop steps and wider access, as well as the convenient flat fare offered by Lothian buses of £1.50 for travel anywhere in the city. In comparison passengers in Glasgow and Dundee had to pay staged fares, making it inconvenient in terms of finding the correct change for the required fare.
6. The charity said there were a number of ways bus users could try to resolve any issues they might have. In addition to campaigning with their local councillor or local authority itself, their MP, MSP, the charity also had a helpline called Silver Line Scotland, which was jointly run with the Silver Line. That was a resource for people to call up to find advice, maybe friendship, and to have their concerns signposted and referred on. The helpline also served as a forecasting tool for the charity's Policy Team who collated into data any issues that repeatedly came up and should perhaps be taken forward for campaigns.
7. Although Age Scotland did not particularly get complaints about actual services, it had received a recent complaint from an older person in Aberdeen about their local Stagecoach buses, which had replaced the drop-down services with less accessible intercity coaches. The charity would be looking into this as it was concerned about the impact on the elderly as well as those whom were less able.
8. There was also a case study from the Still Waiting campaign where a FirstGroup bus route in Bo'ness, near Falkirk, was diverted. This was a key service for the passengers who used it to go to the social club. Although FirstGroup was the only actual company mentioned in this case, Age Scotland noted this was possibly for no other reason than that the company operated services in so many areas.
9. Overall feedback from users was the need for more availability of services and at locations and times convenient to them. NHS access was a key issue, with the example that even in Edinburgh it could take as long as an hour or

more and perhaps two different buses for users travelling to the hospital from some parts of the city. This could cause problems especially where people had other commitments, such as providing childcare for grandchildren etc. There were charitable services from bodies such as St Andrew's Ambulance, but with a growing population of older people who were living longer, demand was increasingly greater than could be met. There were also community transport options – however, these differed within each city and town and local authority area. Age Scotland said it was campaigning for free travel on the dial-a-bus services for people in rural areas.

## **Change in circumstances and undertakings**

10. Age Scotland said that circumstances since 1997 had changed within the bus market, and competition was more evident, whereas before there were larger regions like Strathclyde and Lothian. Older people themselves also had changing needs and circumstances. Local authorities' budgets were under much pressure and the privatisation of services involving more parties created more interest and investment problems. This could be a risk in terms of meeting people's needs. As an example, Age Scotland had recently taken up a case brought by some people in Edinburgh complaining about the incorrect installation of privatised bus shelters taken over by an advertising firm. The complaints were that the installing engineers had not lowered the ground prior to installation, rendering the seats too high, and also insufficient access for people's prams and wheelchairs to get through on the pavements.
11. Age Scotland said that if FirstGroup was to cut back on services (as a consequence of the undertakings being lifted) then that could have a bad knock-on effect, especially for small communities that did not have access to amenities. Overall, however, Age Scotland did not express a view on whether or not the undertakings should be varied or lifted.