



## CAITHNESS TRANSPORT FORUM

### MINUTES OF MEETING HELD IN T3UK, JANETSTOWN, THURSO ON FRIDAY 23 JANUARY 2009

**Present:** John Green, (Chair) Association of Caithness Community Councils  
Angela Donaldson, Highlands & Islands Airports Limited  
Ian Moncrief, Highland Council  
Eric Larnach, Initiative at the Edge  
Coreen Campbell, Caithness Community Transport  
Ranald Robertson, HITRANS  
Louise Smith, HITRANS  
John Banister, Wick Airport Consultative Committee  
George Bruce OBE, Caithness Partnership  
Cllr the Lady Marion Thurso, Highland Council  
Cllr Robert Coghill, Highland Council  
Billy Manson, Halkirk Community Council  
Anson McAuslan, Wellbeck Estates  
Colin Mackenzie, Consultant Engineer  
Rob Gibson MSP  
Niall MacDonald, Rob Gibson's Office  
Anna MacConnell, Caithness Partnership

#### 1. **APOLOGIES**

Cllr Donnie Mackay, John McFadzean, Campbell Stuart, Jamie Stone MSP

#### 2. **MINUTE OF PREVIOUS MEETING**

The minutes of the previous meeting were adopted with one amendment (?)

#### 3. **CAITHNESS BUS USERS GROUP**

Seven individuals had come forward to offer themselves as members of the proposed bus users group. It was agreed they and those proposed at the previous Community Transport Forum meeting, would be contacted to invite them to a public meeting. Anna to arrange a meeting in February in Thurso.

John Green had been copied a letter from Stagecoach to Jamie Stone which demonstrated that our combined efforts to lobby for toilets had been successful and buses with toilets on board will be put on the 25x service in the summer. These buses would not have wheelchair access. Mr Green felt that this demonstrates that Stagecoach does take account of public pressure and pressure from bodies such as Caithness Transport Forum.

Ronald Robertson from HITRANS gave a presentation on bus transport explaining that in Scotland 13% of the working population travel to work by bus. In Edinburgh that figure is 26% because the region has a simplified bus network, night buses, the transport companies work closely with the local authority, they invest in new vehicles and have a flat rate of fares. In rural Scotland 6% travel to work by bus, 8% in Highland and 11% of people in Caithness travel to work by bus – well above the Highland figures and comparing favourably with urban areas. Dounreay workforce are key to this and a generation of people have become bus users.

Stagecoach appears fairly willing to invest in vehicles. HITRANS has no funding now but has access to funds through an EU programme. A proposal for Caithness network investment includes purchase of 3 low floor buses for local runs (making a total of 7 low floor buses active in Caithness). HITRANS plans to seek funds from the NDA towards a package of investment in vehicles for the Inverness – Caithness route.

The Transport Forum welcomed this proposal and suggested that Ronald speak to Eann Sinclair in the first instance. Caithness Transport Forum will write to HITRANS supporting the proposal (**ACTION: Anna**)

#### **4. NEXT STEP FOR TRANSPORT INFRASTRUCTURE IMPROVEMENTS**

Rob Gibson MSP explained that he had led a session at the Caithness Conference in September 2008 regarding the transport infrastructure required for economic development in the north. The next step is to consider what short term improvements can be made and make a business case for those. There is a problem with the current methodology of examining business cases in relation to population size as this disadvantages the rural areas. Mr Gibson felt that we should be working in a variety of different ways, looking at new ways of funding projects and finding arguments to support transport development.

Anson McAuslan explained that the Wellbeck Estate has asked Colin Mackenzie to do a report on Berriedale for them. Colin has now sifted through the STPR and will explain how we could potentially move forward with a unified front.

Colin Mackenzie explained that Berriedale is not mentioned in the STPR and Caithness is mentioned only once. The A835, A82 and A87 get a more detailed mention than the A9 north of Inverness (which will receive less than £10M

whereas the A835 gets £10 – 15M) and it is mentioned as ‘road safety improvements’ not engineering improvements. There is no mention in STPR of A99 and nothing specific for A9 north. Mr Mackenzie feels that Caithness should push for “An ongoing programme of targeted low cost online improvements” which will improve safety, journey time reliability, mitigate the perception of remoteness and enhance economic opportunities and prosperity. Caithness should seek £1M per annum to include year’s 1-2 Berriedale hairpin, 2-5 Berriedale climbing lane (linked with associated improvements at Borgue and Castlehill) and years 1-10 A99 Latheron to Wick low cost visibility and online improvements. The CTF should agree what’s wanted, publicise this and formally respond to STPR consultations, seek support from THC, HITRANS, MP, MSPs and lobby Transport Scotland. The co-operative attitude of Wellbeck Estate should be emphasized and built on. There would also be merit in getting a common approach north of the Dornoch Firth.

George Bruce reminded members that they had agreed to defer a decision until after the STPR was published. Part of the problem has been that HITRANS has seemed to ignore Caithness and the north in the past. The Caithness Transport Forum should take the decision to support Colin’s suggestion and endeavour to find money to get the engineering works done for the solution that does not include a flyover. He felt that if Caithness Transport Forum don’t go ahead and push for the cheaper options at Berriedale it will be another twenty years before the opportunity arises and that there should be no more delaying.

Angela Donaldson said she agreed wholeheartedly. She also felt the Caithness Transport Forum needs to review the Vision document and then agree priorities. Colin’s presentation should become part of the revised vision.

Rob Gibson reiterated support for this approach and welcomed the Wellbeck Estates positive attitude to finding a solution at Berriedale. A study into improvements at Wick Airport had been completed and there had been discussion whether other funding be sought if HIAL were unable to finance the proposal. He also noted that recent studies tend not to focus on what transport infrastructure proposed developments need in order to go ahead. The Pentland Firth developments should be recognized in the National Planning Framework. Louise Smith felt that economic development has to be the most important driver and a lot of the documents were produced before we know the area would become the national focus for marine energy developments. The Vision can be updated in light of what we now know in terms of new companies wishing to come here and requirement to transport goods by road and rail as well as by sea.

Improvements to the lighting are achievable. HITRANS is about to start a study looking at air service issues.

Ian Moncrief confirmed that engineering costs for projects comes from Highland Council's revenue budget. At the previous Caithness Transport Forum meeting Cllr Laing and Niall Gillies of Highland council said they were going to produce a list of small projects that would be ready should money become available from slippage in the Forth crossing budget. John Green felt that the A99 each side of Keiss should be considered for that. Land had been acquired in 1997 for the project.

Closer working with Orkney is desirable and Anna had made with the Orkney Islands Council Convenor, Stephen Hagan, who agreed to discuss with Caithness representatives where there are commonalities between Caithness and Orkney in terms of transport requirements.

## **Updates**

### **Roads**

Cllr Robert Coghill raised the issue of grass cutting out of season. From October to April three Highland Council tractors are unnecessarily cutting verges.

A question was raised whether the Community Transport Forum should take a view on Gaelic road signs. There is currently a moratorium on all road signs in Caithness. No view will be taken by Caithness Transport Forum at this point.

Iain Moncrief reported that work is ongoing at Thurso pedestrian precinct with a completion date expected mid-March. Millers are about to start work on Brough road with completion expected at the end of March and similarly the Hill of Warse.

### **Rail**

Mike Lunan reported that there are rumours that train operators may be giving up their contracts (e.g. National Express) and there has been a decline in the quality of services. Firstgroup has not yet been affected.

### **Sea**

Scrabster Harbour Trust report attached.

Mark Norton's report on a meeting with a representative of Bristol Port Authority attached.

Mark Norton, DORLAG, had been in discussion with rail freight companies regarding the Dornoch crossing and had a positive meeting with Lairg Community Council. DORLAG, Caithness Partnership and Caithness Transport Forum have maintained their objection to failure to protect the proposed route of Dornoch Firth rail crossing in the Sutherland Local Plan.

There has been no progress on achieving journey time reductions on the far north line because of all the un-gated level crossings.

### **Air**

The Wick Airport statistics were circulated and demonstrated signs of improvement for the Aberdeen service. The figures for Edinburgh flights remained level despite the Inverness to London flights showing a decline. There has been no other perceptible effect of the economic downturn. Since 2004 Wick Airport has seen continuous growth and improvements at the airport in 2008 increased 15%. Mr Green welcomed such a positive report from the airport.

John Banister noted that he will be looking for confirmation at the next Wick Airport Consultative Committee meeting that a new air traffic controller will be appointed. The airport had been forced to close on a couple of occasions because of lack of cover and this could damage the airports reputation. It was queried whether any lessons could be learned from Stornoway Airport as they had suffered a protracted period of ATC coverage and solved the problem.

### **5. A.O.C.B.**

Billy Manson raised the issue of the Stagecoach service to Aberdeen Airport to catch Wick flights. Angela Donaldson will contact Stagecoach to seek a resolution. **(ACTION: Angela contact Stagecoach representative)**

Caithness Partnership has produced a plan for spending LEADER funding. More publicity for the Plan is needed **(ACTION: Anna to write press release)**

### **6. DATE OF NEXT MEETING**

The next meeting will take place in the morning of Friday 27 February 2009 in Wick.

## **Scrabster Harbour Trust – update for Caithness Transport Forum**

### **1. Development Programme**

Development plans are progressing. Now that the preferred option for the redevelopment of the old fish market pier has been selected, work has begun on the grant applications for funding to allow the works to be tendered.

The level of commercial interest in the port remains very high. The Trust continues to work hard with the public agencies to realise the potential of the port and secure economic benefit for the county.

### **2. Port Activity**

The Gross Tonnage through the port for the calendar year 2008 amounted to 9.7 million tonnes, a small decrease of 1% compared with 2007.

Fishing sector revenues are ahead of expectation which is particularly encouraging given the difficult circumstances for the industry. Oil and Gas activity declined in 2008 in major part reflecting the extreme weather that restricted operations on the Atlantic Margin in the first and final quarters of the year. However, record levels of activity West of Shetland are forecast for 2009.

### **3. Cruise Activity**

The cruise programme for 2009 is now finalised. The programme comprises ten cruise visits, reaching double figures is a considerable achievement. The biggest vessel visiting is the Prisedam, the vessel measures 37,983 gross tonnes and carries 810 passengers. A maximum of 3,866 passengers are expected to visit Scrabster and Caithness.

Highland Council has once again agreed to provide free courtesy buses into Thurso for the cruise passengers. The Trust would wish to express its gratitude to the Council for continuation of this service and ask for its appreciation to be recorded in the Transport Forum minutes.

Scrabster will again be exhibiting at the Seatrade Cruise Exhibition held in March in Miami, as part of the Cruise Scotland stand.

### **4. Smyril Line / Norrona**

The Trust will shortly be resuming dialogue with Smyril Line regarding their future plans. Whilst it is certain there will be no visits of Norrona in 2009. The possibility of restoration of the service in future years should not be ruled out.

**22 January 2009**

## **Report on meeting at St. Andrews' House, Bristol Ports Authority**

### **Introduction**

This is a report on a meeting I had with Niels Westberg, one of the directors of Bristol Port Authority with over 30 years' experience of the shipping industry, and a tour of both Portbury and Avonmouth Docks complexes near Bristol. This took place on Monday the 29<sup>th</sup> December 2008.

### **Meeting and discussion**

The purpose of this meeting was to seek some independent advice on the prospects on the Scapa Flow deep sea container hub in the Orkneys, the general shipping development prospects in the North of Scotland and how these could feed into rail freight developments for the Far North Line. This is part of the ongoing Stage 3 of our campaign to seek as much industrial/ private sector/ commercial support as possible for the Dornoch Rail Link and other major upgrades for our Line.

We had an interesting and productive meeting, with the following topics discussed:

- I opened the meeting by briefly presenting our campaign and the results from the studies we had commissioned. An electronic copy of our studies was submitted. I explained the relevance of the Scapa Flow and other shipping related opportunities, along with the support of the Scottish Government for the Scapa Flow scheme. I also explained the efforts to develop the Caithness economy in the face of the Dounreay closure challenges and the Pentland Firth renewable energy scheme;
- Niels then stated that, while there are issues of existing capacity constraints at the major UK ports, programmes are either planned or underway to expand these ports substantially. One example is the £500 million expansion of the Avonmouth port, to allow for expansion of cargo payloads beyond the current 120,000 tonne levels. Other examples include Felixstowe, Thames Gateway, Southampton, Liverpool, Teesport harbours, giving a total expansion of an additional 12 million TEUs (Twenty-foot Equivalent Units). The TEU is a measure of shipping freight container capacity;
- In addition, major expansion of Continental ports is underway, with Wilhelmshaven in Germany being cited as an example;
- The salient point is that the Scapa Flow project requires major private sector commercial shipping industry support for it to work. Given the above, this is unlikely, as there is little enthusiasm from the major freight carriers for it. The natural advantages of the Scapa Flow harbour are nevertheless recognised, and I made it clear that this is a high priority Scottish Government objective;
- The expense of overland transport compared to sea transport was highlighted, with coal from Avonmouth to Didcot being cited as an example. It costs \$8/ tonne to ship the coal from Australia to Avonmouth in the U.K., and a further \$8/ tonne to then transport it by rail from Avonmouth to Didcot;
- Time taken to ship materials is not as commercially important as the cost of shipping it. There may be limited shipping related railfreight opportunities for railfreight in the Caithness area;
- The Dornoch Rail scheme is a good scheme for pursuing, but the expense would prove a major challenge. Private finance would be needed to at least partly pay

- for this, as Government money would be difficult to obtain under current circumstances;
- The advice given for the Link is that as much support as possible is needed from potential freight users to make a commercial case for such a project. Examples of this would include the supermarkets in Caithness, and other local businesses. Support from rail freight operators is also important;
  - To this end, we need to clarify whether the proposed tunnel at Dornoch would accommodate W8 or W10 gauge containers. The point was also made that the light rail Link option, as suggested in the Mott Macdonald proposal, would be difficult to justify if this precluded the use of freight on the Link;
  - The STAG 2 study was recognised as an important next step for the progression of the studies for the Dornoch Rail Link. Environmental issues, while recognised, were not considered to be a major show stopper for a project such as this;
  - The visit to both the Portbury and Avonmouth docks, kindly conducted by Niels, was most interesting. I learnt that these docks are the main handling facility for most of the car imports and exports from the South of England; that they receive and distribute up to 20 trainloads (nearly 40,000 tonnes!) of coal a day; and that they handle a huge and expanding variety of freight for both import and export (75% and 25% respectively);
  - The ports employ 6-700 people directly, with further indirect work giving employment for up to 7,000 people;
  - One major challenge for the docks identified was that of the proposed Severn Barrage renewable energy scheme. There is a major campaign to stop it, which the Bristol Ports Authority is part of.

Niels has agreed to advise us on our campaign, and he is an important ally. We now have a good idea as to the direction we should follow on a commercial basis, although there are other aspects which can work in our favour. This has been a useful and productive visit, and appreciation and grateful thanks are extended to Niels Westberg for his co-operation and assistance in making this visit possible.

**Mark W. Norton, Convener, Dornoch Rail Link Action Group January 2009**