



CAITHNESS TRANSPORT FORUM

MINUTES OF MEETING HELD IN WICK ASSEMBLY ROOMS ON FRIDAY 2nd OCTOBER 2009

Present:

John Green, (Chair)	
Angela Donaldson,	Highlands & Islands Airports Limited
Angus MacInnes	Northern Constabulary
Billy Manson	Halkirk Community Council
Cathel Macaskill	Transerv Scotland
Christine Dodd	Local Transport Officer
Coreen Campbell	Caithness Community Transport
Cllr David Flear	Highland Council
Cllr Donnie Mackay	Highland Council
David Sutherland	Ward Manager
Gordon Doull	Wick Harbour Authority
Ian Moncrieff	Highland Council
Ian MacDonald	Friends of the Far North Line
Ivor Souter	Highland Council
Mark Norton	DORLAG
Trudy Morris	Caithness Chamber of Commerce
Veda Swanson	Stagecoach
William Mainus	Stagecoach
Edwin Stewart	Transerv Scotland
David Craig	Caithness Chamber of Commerce
John Thurso MP	
Rob Gibson MSP	

In Attendance: Koreen MacDougall, David Shearer

I. APOLOGIES

Campbell Stuart, Gordon Sinclair, Gordon Mackenzie, John Banister, Louise Smith, Mike Lunan, Ranald Robertson, Cllr Robert Coghill, Bert Macleod. Anna MacConnell

2. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

John Green explained due to staffing issues the minutes of the last CTF meeting were not taken, however minutes from CTF meeting Jan 2009 were presented for information purposes.

3. UPDATE OF MEETING WITH LORD HUNT

John Thurso MP provided an update on his meeting with Lord Hunt, the Energy Minister for the Department of Energy and Climate Change which was organised through the Caithness Regeneration Partnership. The meeting came about because John Thurso MP was concerned that Central Government does not fully appreciate what the potential is in the Pentland Firth for Tidal Energy. A white paper on renewable energy that was produced by the Government in July 2009 was noted to have no mention of the Pentland Firth as a renewable energy possibility. Representatives from the various agencies involved attended the meeting and John Thurso MP reported that all had agreed that it had been a very positive discussion.

John Thurso MP stated that one of the advantages of the Pentland Firth is that the tide is predictable and consistent compared to other possible areas. There is approximately 6-9 Gigawatts of power readily available in the Pentland Firth and would therefore be a major contributor to the power needs of this country. As the UK is a world leader in this technology, there is a real possibility that the Pentland Firth could become the world centre for this industry, resulting in a large number of high quality jobs located here in Caithness.

John Thurso MP said Lord Hunt had stated his enthusiasm for tidal energy and acknowledged that until recently his department had perhaps not been. Trevor Raggett, Lord Hunt's Senior Official who is tasked to write the Marine Energy Action Plan for the UK, also attended the meeting. By putting Lord Hunt and Trevor Raggett in direct contact with people on the ground here in the far north means they will be inputting into the Marine Energy Action Plan. Eann Sinclair of the Caithness Regeneration Partnership is to monitor progress.

Cllr David Flear who was also at this meeting agreed with all John Thurso MP had reported and stated that Lord Hunt and Trevor Raggett both wrote copious notes on what was discussed, demonstrating they had come to listen and clearly seemed to be onside.

John Green concluded that if the Tidal Energy does come into being then it will be a good argument for better links with Roads, Rail, Sea and Air.

Cllr David Flear also stated that we must ensure that the Highland Council Strategic Planning framework has the Thurso Bypass still in its plan. If these areas such as Scrabster take off we will not want all the required steel and construction passing through the centre of Thurso. John Green agreed and said that Koreen MacDougall the Caithness Development Officer will write to the Highland Council and Scottish Government and acknowledged that everyone present would support this action.

Action KM

4. THC LOCAL TRANSPORT STRATEGY

John Green explained that there is a hierarchy of three transport strategies; Scottish Transport Scotland, HITRANS and the Local Transport Strategy. The Scottish Transport Scotland and HITRANS strategies have already been agreed but the Local Transport Strategy is still in draft form so appealed to the forum to write to the Highland Council and put forward the ideas the forum have been pursuing such as the Thurso Bypass, the roads from Wick to John O Groats and John O Groats to the Gills Ferry where significant parts of the road such as before and after Kiess village are not up to standard. It was agreed that the CDO will write to THC and reiterate all the points made in the CTF Transport Vision document including highlighting the importance of marine energy.

Action KM

5. TRUNK ROAD UPDATE

Scotland Transerv's Cathel Macaskill began his report by clarifying Scotland Transerv's role and position. Transport Scotland has awarded Scotland Transerv the contract for the maintenance of the North West region.

The very recent proposals for Berriedale are at present with their Head of Accident and Prevention Unit but as yet they do not have any firm proposals for Berriedale Braes. Orlig Street, Tacher and Hilliclay to Weydale schemes have now been completed. An engineer is at present investigating the traffic lights at Wick.

John Green raised the question regarding the ongoing issue concerning the Wick South Road and Cllr David Flear also pointed out the severe flooding problems experienced in this area. Cathel Macaskill stated that a meeting was to take place in the next few weeks to address this and a short term solution to the flooding problem would be dealt with in this financial year. A long term solution for South Road has also been decided, consisting of carriageway reconstruction with improvements to drainage networks which is planned to take place in the next financial year and has been accepted by Transport Scotland. John Thurso MP emphasised the extent of the flooding problem at South Road pointing out five local residences can no longer obtain insurance and asked for assurances that this work will be completed. Cathel Macaskill explained that Scotland Transerv have the proposals ready and can carry out those proposals as long as funding is made available from Transport Scotland.

Cllr Donnie Mackay pointed out the Orlig Street and Trail Street in Thurso has flooded several times with shops in particular being affected. He also raised the issue regarding the traffic lights in Thurso at the Tesco junction regarding the pedestrian crossing. Cathel Macaskill acknowledged this and stated an engineer would be investigating the problem this week.

Ward Manager David Sutherland praised the good response to date shown by Scotland Transerv regarding any issues that had been brought to their attention.

Cllr David Flear talked about the deteriorating condition of the Causewaymire and expressed his concern regarding its surface state after another winter, queried how far into the programme is it to be resurfaced. Edwin Stuart Scotland Transerv explained that they have submitted their programme to their client Transport Scotland who will review, and based on last years allocated funding, are likely to allocate only around 8% of the total cost of the programme submitted therefore making it extremely difficult to

carry out all the work identified in the programme. Edwin also emphasised Scotland Transerv's enthusiasm to have continued involvement with the CTF as it would benefit everyone here regarding all of the issues raised. John Green agreed and acknowledged the results achieved such as Orlig street and Tacher.

6. TRANSPORT UPDATES

ROADS UPDATE

Ian Moncrieff stated that the main piece of work to report on was the River Street in Wick where the riverside wall collapsed due to erosion. A & W Sinclair Ltd had been appointed to undertake the repairs to the wall. The wall had now been made safe and is now open to traffic. Cllr David Flear pointed out that the cost of this was around £50,000 of which the HC made available with no hesitation and acted very promptly in dealing with the situation. John Green agreed that THC had acted swiftly and effectively in response to the emergency repairs.

The other road related matter to report was regarding the Halkirk Level Crossing accident, and at present the Rail Regulators and the Transport Police are investigating at this time, therefore the cause of accident is as yet undetermined.

RAIL UPDATE

Mark Norton

Tactical

- Heating issues on early morning train services to be looked at. This is an ongoing issue after the last particularly cold winter, when many passengers complained of cold trains all the way to Inverness. Drivers can book onto the Kyle trains earlier to warm up trains before they leave Kyle, but working time directive considerations work against this being done at Wick for the 06.21 services. This issue will be looked at further, and Dorlag will pursue this through the HITRANS Rail Users' Group;
- Catering has been withdrawn from the early morning (06.20) services from both Wick and the 07.06 service from Inverness to Wick by First Scotrail, apparently on grounds of economy. This is unacceptable and Dorlag will make assertive representations and do all it can to have this service re-instated. This does not improve the passenger comfort and experience for early morning travellers, many of whom have had to travel some way before getting to the trains to start off with. Supplemental: email written to John Yellowlees, First Scotrail external relations manager, with reply received stating that Jamie Stone MSP has tabled questions to the Parliament on this issue;
- Current rolling stock on the Far North Line will be replaced by December 2019 at latest owing to disability access compliance issues. Trains to replace them will probably be Class 170/4 DMUs, currently in use on Inverness - Glasgow/ Edinburgh/ Aberdeen services. Mild concerns about increased weight of new trains, which may cancel out speed advantages owing to more powerful engines, compared to current rolling stock.

Strategic

- Successful and positive meeting held between commercial and regeneration partnership representatives and Transport Scotland/ Network Rail, chaired by Dorlag, on the 4th June this year. This was to emphasise the necessity of major rail upgrades to the Far

North Line (on the lines of what Dorlag and many others are looking for) to help develop the area in the context of the Dounreay closedown and the Pentland Firth project development.

- Rail transport link upgrades are proven to greatly help the areas they serve as shown in other projects (e.g. Stirling/ Alloa/ Kincardine, Ebbw Vale in Cardiff, Larkhall - Milngavie and so on). The Pentland Firth in particular would bring benefits for all of Scotland, and upgrades to the Far North Line, including the Dornoch Rail Link, would greatly help bring this about;
- Transport Scotland and Network Rail inform us that the key representation to make to help bring about these upgrades is the forthcoming consultation (due to take place next year) for the High Level Output Statement (HLOS) for the Control Period 5 for Scottish rail expenditure from 2014-2019. This will be supervised by Transport Scotland and will be the prime document determining what Network Rail will be funded to do this side of the border. Details of these can be found in the minutes of the 4th June, already circulated;
- There will be ongoing developments on the new Georgemas Junction-based rail freight company, On-Route Logistics UK Ltd., described initially in a presentation during our AGM in May this year. We are reliably informed that there will be developments there in November;
- There is an ongoing consultation into the Highland Local Structure Plan, due for conclusion on November the 9th at 5pm. While this makes welcome references to the situation and priorities in Caithness, road upgrades and also makes passing references to the Far North Line, the rail improvements need to be given more serious recognition than they are now. Excerpts from the relevant Plan are attached for the Forum's information in Appendix I of the Dorlag newsletter. The link to the website for the entire plan can be found at this address:
<http://www.highland.gov.uk/yourenvironment/planning/developmentplans/localplans/HighlandWideLocalDevelopmentPlan>

We would please ask that representations be made to the draft Highland Local Plan as a matter of priority.

With regard to the Halkirk level crossing accident on the 30th September, we firstly express our regret and horror at the terrible tragedy which took place there and then, in which three people lost their lives after their car collided with a train. We also express our condolences to the families concerned. Calls for a root and branch review of level crossing safety are supported by Dorlag, but concern is also expressed that the issue of road user misuse of such crossings should be fully and objectively addressed in such a review should it be authorised, along with other considerations. Over 95% of recorded level crossing incidents are caused this way. It is nevertheless inappropriate for us or anyone else to pass comment on the recent Halkirk accident, until the precise circumstances surrounding this accident are competently elucidated, or on other individual cases given recent Press coverage.

We are also reliably informed that the recently stated expenses of £1 million for installing automatic barriers at each crossing are a serious underestimate of the true costs, with figures of £3-4 million or more being considered more accurate. If any level crossing review recommends that additional barriers are installed at any crossings on the Far North Line or elsewhere, then the issue of how these are funded needs to be very carefully addressed given the above.

Cllr David Flear agreed that there have been too many deaths and too many near misses in the Highlands. He also stated that having recent contact with a Glasgow company who has significant experience with the European Union noted their solution was to have a secondary set of lights for the road user to enable drivers to have advance warning of trains crossing.

Angela Donaldson stated that in view of the figures Mark Norton had quoted perhaps a non technical solution might be more appropriate in the form of employing manual operation of the barriers as opposed to remote operation. Cllr Donnie Mackay agreed with Angela and reminded everyone that in the past Halkirk had indeed had its barriers successfully operated manually for many years and stressed that because of the significant number of incidents at the Halkirk crossing something has to be done to improve the current system. Mark Norton agreed but said we need to thoroughly investigate what the best way forward would be.

MSP Rob Gibson expressed his sympathy regarding the recent rail crossing tragedy and stated that one of the problems might be due to the low level of train passes each day contributing to “people becoming somewhat immune to thinking about it” compared to busier crossings elsewhere and stressed that it is important that communities have their say as they experience on a daily basis what goes on.

SEA UPDATE

Gordon Doull

Gordon stated that the first cargo of winter road salt was delivered today and a second delivery will be received shortly. Next week will see the renewed start of fuel tanker deliveries for Hugh Simpson’s newly refurbished tank farm. Gordon reported a very successful summer after the installation of the new marina which has been very well received by both visitors and locals with approximately 250 visitors to date. With their own international marketing they expect a significant increase in visitor traffic for next year.

A linkspan was hoped to be installed at Wick Harbour to provide an alternative landing to the Gills site. Government funding was denied due to Government having already funded the major funding at Scrabster therefore the Wick Harbour Authority will no longer be pursuing this matter and the linkspan has been returned to Orkney.

AIR UPDATE

Angela Donaldson

Loganair announced a Sunday schedule commencing 25th October arriving in from Edinburgh at 15:10 and departing to Edinburgh at 15:40. Angela observed that as of yet this was not too proactively advertised. Angela reported that Loganair announced unexpectedly last week that they have withdrawn the Tuesday Schedule to and from Edinburgh and will review if this is to continue through to the summer programme next year. Angela stated that continuity throughout the week was extremely important to business users and everybody was very disappointed that Loganair have taken this decision.

Angela provided the meeting with STATS and passenger throughput showed to be down significantly, most likely to be recession related with fewer business users using the schedules.

Angela was pleased to report that an air traffic controller has been appointed and was expected to be qualified by March 2010.

Angela stated that the HIE board is meeting in Wick on the 22nd of October and appealed to any invited stakeholders to state their views and concerns to the board. HAIL has already had indications from the Scottish Government that their revenue funding will be reduced next year which will inevitably have an impact in the way they operate.

Angela announced that they now have an airport bus service which operates almost on an hourly basis and they will look into further promoting the service to increase usage and also target to flight times.

John Green noted that the STATS also showed a significant downturn in Charter flights. Angela agreed and stated that Ackergill Tower's throughput for charters were down compared to last year and this was again directly recession related due to the corporate client market they attracted. However October will see an increase in charters due to a BMW car launch due to start on the 16th of Oct.

7. HIGHLAND ROAD UPGRADE REPORT

The Highland Council

Transport, Environmental and Community Services

Briefing for Caithness Transport Partnership

Improvements to the A9 at Berriedale Braes

1. Strategic Transport Projects Review
 - 1.1 The Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change announced the outcome of the Strategic Projects Review (STPR) on 10 December 2008. The projects identified in the STPR will be included in the Scottish Government's capital investment programme for the period 2012 to 2022.
 - 1.2 Improvements to the A9 at Berriedale Braes were submitted for consideration, but were not included in the final outcome of the STPR.
2. Local Trunk Road Improvements
 - 2.1 The report to the Council's Transport, Environmental and Community Services Committee in January 2009 identified a number of projects which had been submitted for consideration in the STPR, but were not successful, these included improvements to the A9 at Berriedale.
 - 2.2 These local improvements are very important to the Highland economy and the Council has committed to make representation in support of these projects, and to work with the Scottish Government and other Agencies to explore alternative methods of delivering these projects.
3. A9 – Berriedale Braes
 - 3.1 The Council supports the proposals included in the Caithness Transport

Vision (Revised 2009) for local improvements to the A9 at Berriedale, including:

- a) Realignment of the road to east of the cemetery
- b) Climbing lane (southbound)
- c) Associated improvements Borgue to Castlehill

- 3.2 Elected Members and officials have met with the landowner to discuss an alternative road line alignment which removes the north hairpin by diverting the road around the old cemetery.
- 3.3 The Council has written to the Nuclear Decommissioning Authority (NDA) to establish if they will fund a feasibility study, including a ground investigation, in relation to the realignment of the road to the east of the cemetery, and improving the south section by introducing a climbing lane.
- 3.4 The Council has also written to Transport Scotland to establish if they will work with the NDA to take forward a feasibility study.
- 3.5 The Council has expressed a willingness to work with both the NDA and Transport Scotland to help progress this project.
- 3.6 Transport Scotland has confirmed that they have instructed their operating company (Scotland TranServ) to examine the Caithness Transport Vision and report back to Transport Scotland with recommendations. Following this, Transport Scotland intend to convene a meeting with all relevant parties including the Highland Council.

8. AOCB

John Green invited Stagecoach to report on bus services regarding the new timetables that were introduced in May.

William Mainus stated that they have received some comments and have made some changes as a result. He also announced 10 replacement buses will be coming to Caithness which are five years old with full CCTV. Christine Dodd queried if these buses with CCTV would be used on school routes. William Mainus confirmed that some of these would be used on school routes as well as other services.

Koreen MacDougall reported feedback from the recent Youth Conference which showed Bus services and Rail serviced were highlighted in four out of five workshops that took place demonstrating that transport is an issue even at a younger age. Koreen has written to Stagecoach and to Firstrail with the results for their information.

9. DONM

John Green thanked everyone for a productive meeting and that the next meeting will be scheduled for a suitable date in January 2010.