



CAITHNESS TRANSPORT FORUM

INAUGURAL MEETING

2 FEBRUARY 2006, WICK TOWN HALL

Present

Cllr Tom Jackson, Caithness Partnership
Mrs Vida Swanson, Highland Country Buses
Mrs Coreen Campbell, Caithness Community Transport
Mr Eann Sinclair, Caithness & Sutherland Enterprise
Cllr David Flear
Cllr John Green
Mr Johnathon Gunn, Highland Council Roads & Transport
Mr Mike Lunan, Friends of the Far North Line
Cllr Graeme Smith
Mr John Banister, Wick Airport Consultative Committee
Ms Anna MacConnell, Caithness Partnership

Apologies

Mr George Bruce, OBE, Caithness Partnership
Mr John Crowden, Association of Caithness Community Councils
Mrs Angela Donaldson, H & I Airports Limited
Mrs Carroll Buxton, Caithness & Sutherland Enterprise
Mr Richard Guest, The Highland Council
Mr John Innes, Arcade Travel
Mr Brian Leonard, Scrabster Harbour Trust
Mr Sandy McWhirter, UKAEA

1. Welcome & introductions

Vice Chair of the Caithness Partnership, Mr Tom Jackson, standing in for Mr George Bruce, OBE, welcomed the group and following introductions moved to adopt a chairman. John Green was nominated as chairman and there being no further nominations Mr Green was appointed chairman of the group.

2 Background to the Forum

Caithness Partnership had recently held an event which brought together agency, business and community representatives to work together to create a draft Caithness Community Plan using the Highland Community Plan as a framework. One of the recommendations from the planning event in December was that a Transport Forum be set up as a sub group of Caithness Partnership. As a sub group of the Partnership the group's liabilities would be covered by the Caithness Partnership insurances and facilitation and support would be provided by the Partnership staff. There are transport issues unique to Caithness yet there is no organisation with the remit to act specifically on behalf of the county's transport needs, focus on local transport issues, seek solutions to local problems or promote transport options across all transport sectors. The Partnership had drawn up a list of organisations and businesses that could potentially be involved and invited them to this meeting. There may be other people/organisations felt to be missing from the group but there would be an opportunity to discuss this when considering the membership of the Forum as it develops its aims and objectives.

3 Standing orders & election of office bearers

A simple document to be prepared by Caithness Partnership, based on a sample from West Yorkshire Transport Partnership, and circulated by email for comment in advance of the next meeting.¹

4 Aim and scope of the Forum

CLr Flear felt that there was a need to highlight the unique situation in Caithness where we depend on a variety of means of transport – air, rail, road and sea. It was hoped that the Forum could lobby and assist in the planning and delivery of transport. Membership of the Forum to be limited to locally based groups initially. If guidance were required regarding a specific issue, ferries for example, then the ferry operators would be asked to participate when appropriate. A document to be drafted by Caithness Partnership clarifying the aim and scope of the Forum.²

5 The Caithness Community Plan – Improving Transport

It was explained that before the draft Caithness Plan went out for consultation sections of the Plan would be reviewed by specialist groups. The Forum members considered the draft Improving Transport section of the Caithness Community Plan, , and made amendments and suggestions for change. An amended copy would be included in the draft Plan and will go out for public consultation in the near future. It was hoped that the Forum would act as a review and monitoring body for the Plan in the future and that the Plan would form the basis of an action plan for the Forum.

Air

John Banister gave an update of the air transport in Caithness. Mr Banister feels that the service is currently the best its been in 20 years but the service remains fragile. The extended Eastern Airways service had shown a 57% increase in

¹ ACTION: A MACCONNELL

² ACTION: A MACCONNELL

passenger traffic yet Loganair has suffered a 16% decline in passenger numbers. However, overall performance in scheduled traffic at Wick is 15% upon last year. Trade was mainly from business customers as holiday traffic difficult to accommodate due to baggage restrictions. High cost of fares is directly related to the high cost of providing a service to a relatively small number of customers. The only way to get reduced air fares at Wick would be through a Passenger Service Order (PSO). Additional points raised by members of the Forum:

- A precedent had now been set with Campbeltown as a the first mainland area to get a PSO and this could be followed up for Wick.
- The Socio-Economic Forum, led by John Thurso, was about to put a Caithness socio-economic study out for consultation – the Forum to respond to that
- Highland Council were in discussion with Orkney Islands Council about reestablishing the Islander service
- Need to find out if there is a transport forum in Orkney and make contact ³
- Need to ensure that HITRANS will make a strong case for PSO from Wick ⁴
- we need to find out more about concessionary fares in general ⁵
- The Scottish Executive should not favour one form of transport for subsidy over another

Rail

An update on rail transport issues in the north was provided by Mike Lunan. Friends of the Far North Line is currently campaigning for improvements including a 4th train north and small improvements to the rail infrastructure which will allow faster journey times. A review of the whole infrastructure of the North Line was being pressed for (the Association of Caithness Community Councils had petitioned the Scottish Parliament) which would look at the costs and benefits of improvements but would not be confined to considering a Dornoch link. Additional points raised by members of the Forum:

- Concerns were raised that the Highland Rail Partnership does not reflect aspirations for Caithness.
- The Structure Plan for Caithness identifies a new station at Halkirk
- It should be an aspiration that the local supermarkets use rail rather than road for freight
- In light of the new Invernet service consideration should be given to reducing stops on Thurso to Inverness service at certain times
- Improvements are required in public transport between Thurso station and Scrabster harbour for Orkney ferry
- Problems getting bicycles on trains north and difficult to take bikes on buses unless they can flat-pack. Perhaps bolt-on bicycle carriers on buses and trains would be the answer?
- Frank Roach, Highland Rail Partnership, has expertise in rail freight issues and could be invited to join the Forum for specific discussions

Road

³ ACTION: A MACCONNELL

⁴ ACTION: J. GREEN, D. FLEAR

⁵ ACTION: A MACCONNELL

- Boy racers are an increasing problem in some communities. Community Safety Action Team is apparently looking at initiatives to deal with that.
- Need to get a copy of BEAR's capital plan to see what is in there about A9 ⁶

Sea

Cllr Graeme Smith reported that Wick Harbour Trust is considering whether to develop freight facilities or to develop facilities for pleasure craft. Gills Ferry service would be guaranteed if the linkspan at Wick were operational. Work is underway to bring cruise ships to the Highlands, including Scrabster, and representatives were going to Miami to promote the Highland harbours. There may be freight opportunities for the local harbours if Shetland and Faroes links explored.

Additional points raised by members of the Forum:

- Need contact details for Shetland Transport Partnership ⁷
- An essential role of the Caithness Transport Forum is to integrate the transport system
- David Summers to be invited to attend a Forum meeting to see how integration can be improved
- Need to ensure that there are timetables and people have access to them and integrate shopkeepers into the system (St Andrews have good experience of this). Coreen Campbell will distribute timetable to shops and other public places ⁸
- The HC timetable does not include air transport
- Timetables at bus stops are put up regularly then vandalised

6 Issues to be raised with HITRANS

Although it had been understood originally that members of HITRANS were to visit Caithness early in February (hence the haste to inaugurate the Caithness Transport Forum) the visit had been postponed until 27 March. Issues highlighted at this meeting would be raised with HITRANS members by Cllr Green and Cllr Flear. *Note that HITRANS is to be renamed Highlands & Islands Transport Partnership.*

7 Publicity

A press release and photograph to go into the John O Groat Journal publicising this meeting.

8 AOCB

- Highland Council is consulting regarding the list of subsidised bus service contracts – response required by 27 March.

⁶ ACTION: A MACCONNELL

⁷ ACTION: A MACCONNELL

⁸ ACTION: C. CAMPBELL

- Scottish Executive is seeking responses to the Public Transport Forum's consultative document. This group should respond. A link to the consultation document to be emailed out ⁹
- Network Rail are visiting Thurso on 15 February to discuss the Forsinard development. An invitation to be sought for Cllr Green ¹⁰
- Howard Brindley to be invited to next meeting ¹¹

9 DONM

It was agreed the Forum should try to meet every second month initially. Next meeting to be held in early April. Members to be canvassed regarding their preference for evening or daytime meetings¹²

⁹ ACTION: A MACCONNELL, M. LUNAN

¹⁰ ACTION: M. LUNAN

¹¹ ACTION: J. GREEN

¹² ACTION: A MACCONNELL