



CAITHNESS TRANSPORT FORUM

Meeting with representatives of Orkney Transport Forum, Northlink, Pentland Ferries and John O'Groats Ferries

26 June 2006 Pentland Hotel, Thurso

Present: Cllr John Green (Chairman)
Mr George Bruce, OBE, Caithness Partnership
Mr Mike Lunan, Friends of the Far North Line
Mr John Crowden, Association of Caithness Community Councils
Mr Bert Macleod, Highlands & Islands Federation of Small Businesses
Mr Eann Sinclair, Caithness & Sutherland Enterprise
Cllr Graeme Smith
Mr George Bruce, OBE, Caithness Partnership
Mrs Elizabeth Marshall, Highland Council
Cllr David Flear
Mr Brian Leonard, Scrabster Harbour Trust
Mr Fred Fermor, John O'Groats Ferries
Cllr Bob Sclater, Orkney Islands Council
Mrs Alison Barclay, Orkney Islands Council
Mr William Calder, Scrabster Harbour Trust
Mr Donald Allan, Scrabster Harbour Trust
Ms Linda Knott, Pentland Ferries
Mrs Jayne Allan, Northlink Ferries
Ms Anna MacConnell, Caithness Partnership

Apologies

Mr John Banister, Wick Airport Consultative Committee
Mrs Carroll Buxton, Caithness & Sutherland Enterprise
Ms Louise Smith, HITRANS
Miss Angela Donaldson, HIAL
Mrs Coreen Campbell, Caithness Community Transport
Cllr William Mowat
Mr Gareth Crichton, Northlink Ferries
Mr Andrew Banks, Pentland Ferries

1 Welcome and introductions

George Bruce, OBE, welcomed everyone on behalf of the Caithness Partnership and was delighted to welcome colleagues from Orkney and the ferry companies to discuss common issues. HC Caithness Area Convenor, Cllr David Flear, also welcomed the Transport Forum's guests and expressed a desire that the Caithness and Orkney Transport Forums could continue to work together for the mutual benefit of both communities. Cllr John Green outlined the background to the Caithness Transport Forum and the development of the Caithness Transport Vision document. The Vision will be launched to coincide with a visit to Caithness in August of Tavish Scott MSP, the Scottish Executive Minister for Transport.

2 Joint issues

As vice-chair of HITRANS Cllr Sclater indicated that he is happy to represent the views of the area north of Inverness as transport improvement in Caithness will have benefits for Orkney. He also drew attention to Louise Smith's membership of HITRANS and her capabilities in putting forward a Caithness viewpoint. HITRANS is moving at a quicker pace than previously and is currently preparing a Regional Transport Strategy. The importance of having a local strategy to put forward to HITRANS was emphasized. Scottish Executive funding for projects is dependent on their appearing in the Regional Transport Strategy. Cllr Sclater's willingness to support Caithness' objectives was welcomed.

3 A9 improvements – how can we work together?

- Tavish Scott has agreed to visit Caithness and view the Berriedale Braes. The A99 has been confirmed as the most dangerous road in Scotland (according to a recent AA survey) and this should be highlighted when campaigning for road improvements. Jamie Stone MSP had taken part in a recent debate on transport in the Parliament. It is important that every opportunity is taken to highlight the need for improvements to the A9 and A99.
- Orkney and Caithness should draw up a joint approach taking care to ensure that the Caithness and Orkney transport strategies fit together ¹. Although the Highland Council priority is improvement to Berriedale Braes the Caithness Transport Forum has been careful not to prioritise the projects outlined in the Vision because the Forum is concerned with promotion of a variety of improvements . However, the projects in the Vision could very easily be prioritised for lobbying purposes. The draft Orkney Transport Strategy will be completed in September. A joint meeting to bring the ideas of the two forums together later in the year is required.

¹ACTION: A MACCONNELL, A BARCLAY

- Elizabeth Marshall felt that a joint survey for rail and sea freight would be useful.
- Fred Fermor suggested that the northern part of the A9 should be given a name, such as “the Great North Road” in order to create an identity for stimulating tourism and that extra lay-bys could be created to make the most of the views along the coastal road.
- William Calder felt that the tourism side is important but that speed and safety of traveling is paramount for commercial operators therefore road improvements must meet the needs of different types of user including hauliers and tourists.

4 Tourist literature/displays at terminals

Discussion centred around “gateway” work at ports and airports:

- Orkney has been developing its gateway provision at ferry terminals. Northlink plans to develop information and displays in the Scrabster terminal to provide Orkney information for outbound passengers and Caithness information for inbound traffic – it would be useful to bring people together to see how the space available could best be used. Scrabster Harbour Authority will provide copies of the Caithness promotional DVD to Northlink to show in the terminal buildings². It was felt that reciprocal work could be carried out on both sides of the Firth with Caithness promoting Orkney and vice-versa.
- Concerns were raised about the lack of, and poor quality of Visit Scotland services for Caithness. Eann Sinclair reported that the North Highland Initiative is progressing a branding project for the whole north mainland and that the result of that should be a higher quality marketing product under local control and guidance.
- It was suggested that Northlink could promote Joint Orkney/Caithness package holidays. Jayne Allan agreed to take the suggestion to Northlink³.
- It may be possible to get the Caithness promotional DVD updated to include footage from the World Surfing Championships from O Niell’s.⁴
- Now that the Wick/Kirwall air link has been re-established there is an opportunity to develop Caithness/Orkney promotion at both airports.

5 Connectivity/timetabling

There are problems with connectivity between the buses and ferries at Scrabster. There are further mismatches with the train, bus and ferry timetables at Scrabster and difficulties in relation to getting buses to deliver to the new terminal. There is no onward public transport available from Gills Bay without a fairly long wait. It was agreed that Caithness Partnership would collate this and other relevant information for the Forum with a view to seeking a resolution. It

² ACTION: D ALLAN

³ ACTION: J ALLAN

⁴ ACTION: D FLEAR

was suggested that an examination of patterns of travel would be helpful in determining needs, eg. foot passengers are less likely to travel in the evenings.

6 Air services

- The new Wick-Kirkwall-Glasgow flight was welcomed. The 40% discount airfares scheme should be publicised as much as possible and awareness should be raised that the discount also applies to cheaper fares⁵.
- It was felt that the Forums should be pushing for better communications with other destinations, for example, a joint lobby for a 7 day service.
- Dounreay has indicated that a Sunday air service would be useful.

7 Rail services – passengers and freight

- It was noted that moves are afoot in Caithness to increase timber transportation by rail. A company based in Lybster, Onroute Logistics, is awaiting issue of a private rail freight operators license (the first in Scotland). The company will operate out of Georgemas Station. There is the potential to access the Rail Freight Facilities Grant from Scottish Executive to support provision of infrastructure.
- It was suggested that Highland Council, through the planning process, could encourage the supermarkets to consign freight to rail rather than road.
- Orkney would be happy to see more supermarket freight off the roads to rail.
- A fourth daily northbound train from Inverness to Thurso/Wick is being lobbied for, and it would be logical to ensure that it will connect with the 19.00 ferry departing from Scrabster.
- Dornoch rail link is seen by Caithness Forum as part of a package of improvements that will reduce the journey time on the Far North Line.
- Computerised container handling (road to rail) was trialed some years ago at Georgemas Junction by Alex Grant and found to be efficient and cost effective.

8 AOCB

Cllr Bob Sclater thanked the Caithness Forum for hosting this meeting and reiterated that he felt it is a positive step for the two forums to be talking and working together on joint issues and suggested that the next meeting should be held in Orkney in several months time. Cllr Green thanked all those present for their participation in what had been a positive and useful meeting.

⁵ ACTION: CAITHNESS TRANSPORT FORUM