



CAITHNESS TRANSPORT FORUM

21 August 2006, North Highland College, Thurso

Present: Cllr John Green (Chairman)
Mrs Coreen Campbell, Caithness Community Transport
Mr Mike Lunan, Friends of the Far North Line
Mr John Crowden, Association of Caithness Community Councils
Mr Richard Guest, The Highland Council
Mr Bert Macleod, Highlands & Islands Federation of Small Businesses
Eann Sinclair, Caithness & Sutherland Enterprise
Cllr Graeme Smith
Mr George Bruce, OBE, Caithness Partnership
Mr John Banister, Wick Airport Consultative Committee
Ms Anna MacConnell, Caithness Partnership
Miss Carol Gunn, CASE
Cllr David Flear
Ms Louise Smith, HITRANS
Mr John Farquhar, Nuclear Decommissioning Authority
Mr John MaFadzean, Scotland Transserve
Mr Frank Roach, Highland Rail Partnership

Apologies

Mrs Carroll Buxton, Caithness & Sutherland Enterprise
Mrs Elizabeth Marshall, Highland Council
Mr Brian Leonard, Scrabster Harbour Trust
Miss Angela Donaldson, H & I Airports Limited
Cllr Billy Mowat
Doug Shanks, UKAEA
Mrs Veda Swanson, Highland Country Buses

I Minutes

Minutes of the previous meetings (01.06.06 and 21.06.06) were agreed.

2 Matters arising

Orkney/Caithness meeting:

Northlink has recently offered Orkney businesses the opportunity to advertise in their consumer guide. It was agreed that the Forum will write to Northlink's production agency, Shaw Marketing & Design, requesting that Caithness companies be given the opportunity to advertise in next year's publication.¹

There is footage available from O'Neills (a sportswear company) of the World Championship Surfing competition in Thurso that might be incorporated into the DVD that John Banister had produced for Wick Airport. John indicated that it would be practical to incorporate a number of additions at once and there had been other requests relating to the content of the DVD. David Flear to provide John Banister with film footage.²

Scrabster Harbour Trust had supplied Northlink with a copy of the DVD to show in the ferry terminals.

3 Discussion on rail Freight

Frank Roach was introduced to the group and gave a presentation on rail freight. That and a question and answer session provided the following information:

- Frank works for Highland Rail Partnership and is a permanent advisor to HITRANS on rail.
- Rail freight is all in the private sector There are four major rail freight companies: EWS, Freightliner, DRS and GB Railfreight with some smaller new entrants: Fastline, Cotswold Advenza, FM and possibly AMEC. The start up costs for a rail freight operator is very significant.
- There is an annual growth of 7-8% of rail freight carried in Scotland, however, without coal deliveries rail freight would be declining
- There has not been a regular service to Georgemas since Safeway sold their Caithness shops to Morrisons who in turn sold them to Somerfield. There are occasional deliveries of pipes to Rockwater.
- Georgemas is in private ownership - this has presented difficulties
- Russel Group moved freight for Homebase's new Wick store to Inverness then by road to Wick
- Asda is known to be in favour of rail freight
- Tesco is due to start using a daily service from Daventry to Coatbridge
- There may be opportunities to take town gas by rail
- There may be opportunities to move more timber by rail particularly if the proposed new Balcas timber processing plant at Invergordon comes on stream
- If there is an upsurge of demand for Caithness flags that could lead to rail freight opportunities
- Freight Facilities Grants are available from Scottish Executive, capital support only

¹ ACTION: A MACCONNELL

² ACTION: D. FLEAR

- Track Access Grant can provide revenue support to help mitigate the cost of using rail
- HRP and HIE propose to investigate how revenue support for rail freight can be allowed under EU state aid laws
- There is rail freight potential in aggregates – bulk cement and sand but like timber it is a low value product
- Unless a customer can offer a serious flow of business it is difficult to get a rail freight operator to quote. Caithness Heat & Power had investigated cost of taking in 30,000 tonnes p/a of timber and were asked to agree to a 20 year contract
- If the potential for freight traffic serving Dounreay decommissioning over the next number of years were quantified this would help determine the viability of rail haulage to Caithness³
- Safeways experience showed that using rail for freight is possible and this could be an incentive to other supermarkets coming to Caithness, however, there needs to be someone co-ordinating this, someone in the middle to sell space on trains to the various companies
- CTF to write to Russells to identify the barrier to rail freight into Caithness⁴

4 Caithness Transport Vision document

The Vision document has been printed and will be circulated beyond CTF/Caithness Partnership following formal presentation to Tavish Scott, Scottish Transport Minister, on 29 August at Berriedale Braes. Presentation and a press statement will be the first step to putting the document in the public domain. A letter inviting comment will be enclosed with each copy as a means of public consultation. A copy had been provided to the Socio-economic Working Group who is putting together a socio-economic plan for Caithness & North Sutherland. The Vision will form the transport section of the strategy. It was agreed that the next stage is to gather some detail around the projects in the Vision and a cost benefit analysis could help prioritise the proposals in the Vision. The NDA may be able to provide funding to support a cost-benefit analysis. Mike Lunan to write to NDA on behalf of CTF⁵

5 Meeting with NDA

George Bruce, OBE, Cllr John Green and Mike Lunan had had a very positive meeting with Dr Ian Roxburgh, CEO of Nuclear Decommissioning Authority. Dr Roxburgh had agreed to “top and tail” a letter to the supermarkets operating in or due to start trading in Caithness soon requesting that they make an effort to work together to try and utilise the railway for freight transportation. In addition Dr Roxburgh felt that the ability of the area to attract inward investment maybe hampered by the frequency of flight cancellations due to the weather and he agreed to “top and tail” a letter to the

³ ACTION: J FARQUHAR (to charge UKAEA to produce a prediction of potential freight volume to Dounreay site that could be transported by rail over next 10-15 years)

⁴ ACTION: CAITHNESS TRANSPORT FORUM

⁵ ACTION: M. LUNAN

appropriate authorities (HIAL) requesting that improved landing aids at Wick could become more of a priority. A further letter requesting minor rail infrastructure improvements to the north line would be sent to the relevant authorities. ⁶

6 Air update- John Banister reported that the Air Discount Scheme is now operational, the number of air passengers flying from Wick had risen but not significantly and it is still too early to say whether the Discount Scheme has made an impact. Haar had been a problem this summer and a number of flights were affected. It is more important than ever to encourage companies to relocate to Caithness and flight cancellations can be a major disincentive. HIAL want to put a radar system into Inverness airport but Inverness has an alternative landing at RAF Lossiemouth. Members felt that money would be better spent improving landing facilities in the more remote airports and questioned where HIAL will spend income from the sale of land in Wick to Tesco, suggesting that it could be reinvested in Wick airport.

Rail update – there has been an increase in the number of fares from Inverness south on some tickets. The head of Rail Transport in Scotland had visited Wick by rail and subsequently suggested there might be a case for 1st class to be reinstated and raised the issue of the state of the rolling stock.

Roads update- John MacFadzean reported that the transition of responsibility for the trunk roads from BEAR to Scotland Transserve has gone well. The new contract ensures that the road is inspected once every 7 days not 28 as previously. Priority road improvement schemes are put forward to Transport Scotland in an annual rolling programme and Transserve is waiting for the government to come back and tell them which projects can be progressed. John will supply a copy of the programme of works to the next meeting.⁷

Locally, there have been problems with traffic lights in Thurso and a company has been contracted to make a new plan for the whole of Thurso starting beginning September. Bridge works at Berridale should be underway soon.

The winter maintenance contractual period is from 1st October 2006 to 15th May 2007. forecasts are received on a daily basis and determine the requirements for any precautionary treatments to be carried out on the trunk roads network. This winter gritters will be using pre-wetted salt on all routes. This adds brine to the salt which helps it stick to the road and become effective more quickly. It also means less salt is wasted. In addition to an precautionary gritting carried out, during the period 1st November to 31 March where the forecasts indicate a drop in temperature patrols with loaded gritters will be carried out between the hours of midnight and 0800 hours.

Transserve will meet Chief Inspector John McDonald and Highland Council staff to discuss repositioning of the snow gates at Newport.

Sea update – bad reports of the Orkney day-trip had been received by a member of CTF primarily relating to the coach service (Rapson's). John O Groats Ferries reluctant to take responsibility. HITRANS is funding signs to Scrabster and Gills.

⁶ ACTION: M.LUNAN

⁷ ACTION: J MACFADZEAN

AOCB: Transportation of stock – new regulations relating to the transport of stock is likely to have a considerable impact on small farmers, crofters and hauliers, particularly in the light of the mart in Thurso closing soon. The Highland Council is taking the matter up with Scottish Executive. The matter will be taken up through the wider Caithness Partnership.

DONM: 25 October 11am in Games Room 2, Assembly Rooms, Wick.