



# CAITHNESS TRANSPORT FORUM MINUTES OF MEETING HELD PENTLAND HOTEL, THURSO 12 JANUARY 2007

## **Present**

Councillor John Green, Highland Council (chairman)  
Ms Louise Smith, HITRANS, Ormlie Community Association  
Ms Elizabeth Marshall, Highland Council  
Mr Ron Peddie, UKAEA  
Mr Brian Leonard, Scrabster Harbour Trust  
Councillor Graeme Smith, Highland Council  
Mr Mike Lunan, Friends of the Far North Line  
Mrs Coreen Campbell, Caithness Community Transport  
Mr Eann Sinclair, Caithness & Sutherland Enterprise  
Mr Richard Guest, Highland Council  
Mr George Bruce OBE, Caithness Partnership  
Miss Angela Donaldson, Highlands & Islands Airports Limited  
Ms Anna MacConnell, Caithness Partnership  
Mr John MacFadzean, Scotland Transserv  
Councillor Billy Mowat, Highland Council  
Mr Eric Larnach, South East Caithness Development Group/Initiative at the Edge

## **In Attendance**

Mr David Summers, Highland Council

### **1. Apologies**

Mr John Banister, Wick Airport Consultative Committee  
Councillor David Flear, Highland Council  
Mrs Carroll Buxton, Caithness & Sutherland Enterprise  
Mr John Crowden, Association of Caithness Community Councils  
Mrs Veda Swanson, Highland Country Buses  
Chief Inspector John McDonald, Northern Constabulary  
Mr Bert MacLeod, Federation of Small Businesses  
Mr John Farquhar, Nuclear Decommissioning Agency

### **2. Minutes of previous meeting**

The minutes of the previous meeting were accepted as a true record: proposed by George Bruce and seconded by Mike Lunan.

### **3. Matters arising/review of actions from previous meeting**

It was noted that there had been reports in the newspapers that NDA had a £22M shortfall in its budget and there were concerns that this would have a major impact on Caithness and the ability of NDA to fund socio-economic projects in the county. The Dounreay workforce was reported to be worried that the shortfall may have an impact on the number of jobs at the plant. Ron Peddie confirmed that the shortfall is for one year and that the details have to be determined yet but that the problem may not be on such a scale as people originally feared.

**Action 3** - Eann Sinclair reported that CASE has put a brief out to tender seeking a consultant to prepare the business case for lengthening the runway at Wick Airport and the results will be due at the end of February. It was confirmed that a similar study for No1 Hangar would be dealt with by Highland Council but that a previous estimate of £230,000 for removal of asbestos sheeting was a hurdle to development. Opportunities for funding may arise from the newly opened round of EU funding.

**Action 4** – relating to flood drains on A99 entering Wick. Richard Guest had met with Transserv Scotland representatives and design work for a complete reconstruction will be completed by the end of February. The community will be consulted as soon as trial pits go in and the remedial work will be combined with improvements on that stretch of road.

**Action 5** - had taken place regarding the relocation of the snow gates on the east coast road. There was some local opposition to the proposed new site. John MacFadzean stressed that the snow gate is not a permanent feature and had only been closed 3 times last winter. A report prepared for Transport Scotland will go to the next Area Committee meeting for endorsement.

**Action 6** – Russels to be chased up for response. Alex Grant to be written to to determine ownership of Wick Station yard.<sup>1</sup>

***Ken Russell provided a response – see separate sheet. Alex Grant does not own Wick yard – understands its owned by Network Rail.***

UKAEA rail freight study – Ron Peddie reported that an assessment of potential rail freight had been prepared by UKAEA but lacks detail at the moment as there is no clarity yet on the which programmes are to go ahead at Dounreay in the long term. It was suggested that a study into the potential timber transportation could be made to enhance the total freight picture. In addition, some discussion needs to take place about what is required to allow realistic consideration of rail for freight. AM and EM to discuss and bring proposal to the next meeting.<sup>2</sup>

***Proposal provided – see separate sheet***

### **4. David Summers, Highland Council- timetabling issues**

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<sup>1</sup> ACTION: AM

<sup>2</sup> ACTION: EM & AM

David Summers, Highland Council, informed the Forum that the Highland Council's main areas of activity in relation to transport are bus contracts and community transport. The bus service is predominantly commercial and the HC has little formal involvement with that. Contracts for supported bus services amount to £22M annually in Highland including a small amount for subsidised taxis and dial-a-ride services. HC also supports community transport groups with finance and advice and fund several community transport officer's posts. In terms of other forms of transport (rail, ferry, etc) the Council's role is as negotiator.

David chairs the Highland & Island Public Transport Forum which is a grouping of operators and transport users and funders.

David's department deals with Bus Routes Development grant applications (Scottish Executive funding to improve bus services). Routes have to be shown to be likely to be sustainable after 3 years of grant. A new Inverness-Caithness bus link will be funded by the grant

A question was raised regarding disability access on buses – elderly people can travel free on the buses but many do not have enough mobility to be able to get into a bus that is not adapted. Mr Summers responded that all new buses built since 2005 must be accessible. It was pointed out that many of the buses on the local routes are used until they are more than 20 years old. Service buses are not as easy to convert as coaches. It was suggested that public consultation regarding disabled access should be carried out to determine which are the best routes to provide disabled access should converted buses become available or funding become available for conversions.

Mr Summers reported that an additional allocation of £400,000 for supporting bus routes had been received by Highland Council and they are currently consulting on which routes that should be spent. The deadline for replies to this consultation is 18<sup>th</sup> January.

A question was raised as to whether a wheelchair lift could be adapted to allow a seat to be inserted for those who are disabled but not wheelchair bound. David Summers to investigate this.<sup>3</sup>

***Response from David Summers: the tail lifts fitted on many of the smaller minibuses can be ridden on as they have an upright fixed rail to hold onto and the lift merely replaces a seat inside the vehicle so does not need to fold as it is stored. In general the lifts fitted to local service buses/coaches cannot be ridden on as they have no guard rail, by reason of having to fold up into the small space to be stowed. There is no facility for replacing a wheelchair with a seat (which could not be locked onto the plate anyway) or any facility for carrying such a seat on buses.***

Members felt that timetables are difficult to access. David responded that the Highland Council have worked on an up-to-date timetable with Rapsons and he believed it was

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<sup>3</sup> ACTION: DS

available on the buses as the onus is on the bus company to distribute. However, David is keen to hear of instances where people have found it difficult to get a timetable. It was reported that an Integrated Transport Timetable used to be sent to the Area Roads Department but this was no longer the case. Members asked to be provided with a current distribution list.<sup>4</sup>

***Current distribution list provided at meeting.***

Mike Lunan reported that there had been recent discussion regarding the link between Scrabster ferry, bus and new 4<sup>th</sup> train service from Thurso. It was clear that it could be difficult for the ferry and rail services to be flexible, but there should be no difficulty in having the bus wait if the ferry was a little delayed.

Coreen Campbell asked whether there will be new funding available for capital projects as the Caithness Transport Forum has been refused funding for a new community bus on the Thurso. David Summers confirmed that there would be no new money available for capital projects but will discuss the matter with Coreen to see if he can help in some other way.<sup>5</sup>

***No additional funds for capital costs have been found yet.***

**5. East Caithness Bus Service – Initiative at the Edge**

Eric Larnach, Initiative at the Edge Development Officer, reported that access to transport is one of the predominant issues in the South East Caithness Initiative at the Edge area. A pilot scheme to provide an evening bus service to and from Wick had been set up following consultation with the community and it was believed to have run well. Of particular note was the fact that a number of the young people from the area had been able to participate in the Music-link-media project at Wick Youth Club, carry out voluntary activities and take on part-time jobs. The service was also used by people making hospital visits and for shopping trips. In the second week of December Eric received a call from Rapsons stating that the service was being cut as it had not proven to be commercially viable.

Mr Larnach felt that enough time to trial the service had not been allowed, that the service had been set up following various consultation exercises, there was and is clearly a demand for the service and that there should be some mechanism to allow it to continue. Support for retention of the service had been demonstrated by the community councils at Dunbeath and Lybster, the local Highland Councillor, Wick Youth Club and the Caithness Youth Forum and it is difficult to know what more could be done to make a case for its retention. In addition, the service had been cut days after the new Tesco opened at Wick, without testing whether there would be increased uptake by evening shoppers.

The Transport Forum expressed their disappointment in the discontinuation of the service after such a very short trial period. Members felt that the evening bus service

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<sup>4</sup> ACTION: DS

<sup>5</sup> ACTION: DS & CC

had been put in place in response to public demand, the public had used it yet because of a limited population it is always going to be difficult to fill a bus to ensure that it pays its way in fares. The Transport Forum was fully in support of Mr Larnach's efforts to get the service reinstated. They felt the service should be supported through the new funding available in April, although that is not going to alleviate the problem over the next few months.

Elizabeth Marshall suggested that a dedicated bus service is required to meet the Gills Bay Ferry. David Summers felt that timings of existing services could be adjusted to allow that. Pentland Ferries had raised this issue at a previous Transport Forum meeting.

David Summers reported that a new Thurso to Inverness service over the Causewaymire connecting with Wick with an interchange at Latheron will be instigated after April. Perhaps that could be extended to Gills Bay.

David Summers reminded members that [www.traveline.org.uk](http://www.traveline.org.uk) provides information for journey planning.

## **6. Updates**

**Roads:** members queried whether there had been a response to Jamie Stone from Scottish Executive regarding proposed design work at the Berridale Braes. It was understood that design options were to have been made available in November 2006. John MacFadzean agreed to pursue this.<sup>6</sup>

### ***Ongoing.***

Members queried whether there had been any progress made regarding the landslip at Scrabster. John MacFadzean would find out and report back.<sup>7</sup>

### ***Transserv in contact with landowner regarding***

John McFadzean also agreed to report back about the Transserv scheme at Portgower to the next meeting.<sup>8</sup>

### ***Ongoing***

The pedestrian crossing at Thurso Road junction in Wick was discussed and it was reported that a pedestrian phase would be inserted into the traffic lights sequence later this year.

**Air:** Eastern Airways are replacing their current fleet with larger aircraft. They are operating at capacity on certain flights from Wick. Information about this, and the summer timetables, would be given to Wick Airport soon. Angela Donaldson reported a 50% rise in throughput at the airport. Figures for uptake of the Air Discount Scheme

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<sup>6</sup> ACTION: J MACFADZEAN

<sup>7</sup> ACTION: J MACFADZEAN

<sup>8</sup> ACTION: J MACFADZEAN

will be more readily available in the near future as Eastern Airways have a facility on their website which will monitor bookings assisted by the scheme. A question was raised as to whether it is possible to take advantage of the ADS when booking a flight to Wick when in Aberdeen Airport. It was assumed that this would now be possible as Eastern Airways have the facility on their website.

**Rail:** Mike Lunan sought the Forum's support for a Friends of the Far North Line campaign to have controlled emission toilets included in the proposed upgrade of rolling stock used on the Far North Line. Members were happy to give their support to the campaign.

**Sea:** Brian Leonard reported that a license had been granted to allow the Norrona to berth in Scrabster in summer 2007. Agreement had been reached with the ferry company regarding immigration and customs facilities that must be provided at the harbour. As the Norrona is 4 times the size of the Hamnavoe the linkspan needs to be adapted. It was noted that the potential load of the Norrona is 500 cars and that there will clearly be a significant increase in traffic at Scrabster during the summer season. The visitor centre at Scrabster could be improved to promote Caithness better. Visit Scotland to be contacted to see if a leaflet detailing what to see and do in Caithness could be provided.<sup>9</sup>

***Meeting was held on 9 March – led by Elizabeth Marshall – to discuss the publication of an appropriate information leaflet***

## **7. HITRANS Draft Regional Transport Strategy consultation**

HITRANS has compiled a draft Regional Transport Strategy and the document is out for public consultation until 31 January 2007. The completed RTS will guide Scottish Executive spending on transport for the next 20 years. Members of the Forum expressed their concern that there appeared to be very few of the Caithness priorities, as submitted to HITRANS in the Caithness Transport Vision, and agreed that a strong response must be compiled which highlights all the major projects that have been either omitted or given a low priority. Members were angered that the document had almost totally regarded the local priorities established in the Caithness Transport Vision and subsequently provided to HITRANS. It was agreed that a sub group would be convened to draft a response from CTF.<sup>10</sup> Other organisations and individual must be urged to respond to the consultation.<sup>11</sup> Members felt that other local groupings, such as the Socio-economic Working Group, should be paying close attention to the draft Strategy and responding to the consultation. The CTF response to be copied to the MP, MSP and list MSPs for information.<sup>12</sup>

**Complete**

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<sup>9</sup> ACTION: .J GREEN

<sup>10</sup> ACTION:AM

<sup>11</sup> ACTION:CTF MEMBERS

<sup>12</sup> ACTION: AM

In relation to the Berriedale crossing a question was raised regarding the remit of engineers Scott Wilson – is it to cost a bypass or to make justification? <sup>13</sup>

***John Green contacted Heather MacMillan***

**8. AOCB**

It was reported that the Caithness Partnership has decided to invite representatives of the press to their meetings and a question was raised as to whether the Transport Forum would follow suit. Members agreed that a press statement after meetings would be more appropriate for this group. A press release to be sent out once the response to HITRANS consultation is agreed encouraging other organisations to respond to the consultation.

**9. Date of next meeting**

The next meeting will take place on Friday March 16<sup>th</sup> at 2.00pm in Wick – venue to be confirmed.

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<sup>13</sup> ACTION: AM