



# CAITHNESS TRANSPORT FORUM MINUTES OF MEETING HELD WICK TOWN HALL 16 MARCH 2007

## **Present**

Councilor John Green, Highland Council (chairman)  
Ms Louise Smith, HITRANS, Ormlie Community Association  
Ms Elizabeth Marshall, Highland Council  
Miss Donna Stewart, UKAEA  
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  
Miss Angela Donaldson, Highlands & Islands Airports Limited  
Chief Inspector John McDonald, Northern Constabulary  
Ms Anna MacConnell, Caithness Partnership

## **In Attendance**

Miss Christobel Bannerman, Caithness Neurological Group/West of Caithness Community Transport

## **1. Apologies**

Councilor Graeme Smith, Highland Council  
Mr George Bruce OBE, Caithness Partnership  
Mr John MacFadzean, Scotland Transserv  
Councilor Billy Mowat, Highland Council  
Mr Eric Larnach, South East Caithness Development Group/Initiative at the Edge  
Mr John Banister, Wick Airport Consultative Committee  
Councilor David Flear, Highland Council  
Mrs Carroll Buxton, Caithness & Sutherland Enterprise  
Mr John Crowden, Association of Caithness Community Councils  
Mrs Veda Swanson, Highland Country Buses  
Mr Bert MacLeod, Federation of Small Businesses  
Mr John Farquhar, Nuclear Decommissioning Agency

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

The minutes of the previous meeting (12.01.07) were accepted as a true record.

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

**ACTION 1: COMPLETE:** Russells to be asked about barriers to freight on far north line and enquiries made about ownership of Wick Station Yard

– Response from Ken Russell of John G Russell (Transport) Ltd as follows:

### **Barriers to transportation of freight on the far north rail line**

- In order to unlock the far north line for freight a terminal at Inverness is required so that adequate train sizes can be brought from the central belt north – a critical mass is needed to make a feeder service north a realistic proposition.
- The ownership of Georgemas is an issue which either has to be resolved or an alternative found at Wick or Thurso.
- There is an axle restriction into Wick that needs to be clarified.
- There is an issue with gauge on the far north line but this could be resolved later this year as new wagons become available that have a lower platform.
- Need to ensure that the RTS has made proper allowance for freight development on the line.
- Growing customer base in the north – Asda, Tesco, Homebase, cash & carry opportunities, Sommerfield, and in relation to Dounreay decommissioning.
- Southbound – a reliable daily service could be established – Icetech (if the new wagon size allows for stacking freezers) and other markets that could be explored.

***Alex Grant does not own Wick yard – understands its owned by Network Rail.***

**ACTION 2 COMPLETE:** Elizabeth Marshall introduced a paper on rail freight considerations:

### **Rail freight considerations**

#### **THE INFRASTRUCTURE**

- There is a weight restriction on the line north of Lairg.
- In the past Vulcan had wanted to carry heavy freight on the line but could not because of the narrow gauge.
- It is questionable whether or not there is adequate modern rolling stock available, but this information could be sought from EWS, the rail freight operators.
- Jim Welsh and Tony Hagan of Melborpon Ltd are reported to have applied for a license to run rail freight on the Far North Line.
- Georgemas is in private ownership, and Melborpon is reported to be the leaseholder.
- Norfrost owned a loading/transfer system that was highly effective at shifting freight from rail to road and vice versa.
- It may be possible to get large supermarkets such as Tesco to sponsor improvements/commit to using rail freight if services were offered. A questionnaire could perhaps go out to supermarkets.

#### **FUNDING FOR RAIL FREIGHT PROJECTS**

- There is a Freight Facilities Grant administered by Scottish Executive. This provides funds for both infrastructure and pilot projects
- There may be funding available through the new EU ERDF programme
- There may be funding available through Forestry Commission to get some specialist work/further developmental work in order to improve the ability to carry timber harvest and look at requirements for specialist machinery for handling and rolling stock etc.

#### **PROPOSAL**

A study be commissioned to look at ways of developing and maximising rail freight capacity from and to Caithness including timetabling and integration of timetables so that the railway

could be developed to service an overnight freight service from Caithness to Inverness/Shettleston. CTF should set up sub committee to develop a proposal for a study. It was suggested that the Highland Rail Partnership is already looking at this problem and that a way forward might be to meet with Frank Roach again. Donna Stewart reported that UKAEA had produced a rough estimate of the potential loads to and from the plant that could be carried by rail, but that a detailed study would not be carried out unless specifically requested as this would be a major piece of work.

A cost benefit analysis might be required to determine if the volume of freight business would support a rail haulier's purchase of new rolling stock.

**ACTION 3: COMPLETE:** David Summers had responded to a question about getting hydraulic seats/lift onto buses but it was felt that the question had been misinterpreted. **NEW ACTION** David Summers to be contacted again to clarify and a further question about funding adaptations to buses to be raised<sup>1</sup> (AM)

**ACTION 4: COMPLETE:** a distribution list for Highland & Islands public transport timetable was received from David Summers. **NEW ACTION:** A request will be put to David to add Arcade Travel, the public libraries in Wick & Thurso, the railway stations, Scrabster Harbour, Wick Airport, Gills Bay Harbour, the post offices (Lybster, Wick, Thurso, Dunbeath and Watten are all open all year round), Wick and Thurso police stations and on public transport<sup>2</sup>

**ACTION 5: COMPLETE** Coreen Campbell had met with David Summers to discuss funding for Caithness community Transport and a satisfactory outcome had been reached.

**ACTIONS 6, 7 & 8: CARRIED OVER TO NEXT MEETING**

**ACTION 9: COMPLETE** Work is underway funded by Highland Council to produce a high volume of the Caithness Explorer to be available in time for the beginning of the Norrona summer landings at Scrabster.

**ACTION 10 COMPLETE.** To put together a response to HITRANS Strategy. HITRANS agreed to include CTF Vision document as an annex to the RTS.

**ACTION 11: COMPLETE:** a high level of response to HITRANS Strategy was generated from Caithness, among that was strong support for a Dornoch rail link.

**ACTION 12** CTF response to be copied to MSPs **COMPLETE**

**ACTION 12: COMPLETE** – John Green contacted Heather Mcmillan – the study is ongoing.

#### 4. Updates

**Roads:** No update available.

**Air:** Howard Brindley had stated that £1M would be spent on Wick Airport. Angela Donaldson was attempting to clarify this with HITRANS.

Aberdeen flights have been well used, a larger aircraft is now being used (Jetstream 41) and advance bookings are good. Numbers are up 50% on last years figures for same period. The Air Discount Scheme has taken people back into the market for flights. Lognair is providing a flight to Edinburgh for £32 including taxes (if advance booked). Elizabeth Marshall asked for the Forum's support for a lobby for Sunday flights.

**Rail:** HITRANS had stated that £25M will be spent on the north rail line. Members were sceptic that much of this would be allocated to the Far North section.

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<sup>1</sup> Action: contact David Summers AM

<sup>2</sup> ACTION: As above

Mike Lunan reported that the campaign for controlled emission toilets is ongoing.

**Sea:** Norrna landings begin in the summer. An extra 10,000 copies of Northern Explorer will be printed funded by HC. Faroese and Norwegian travel agents have been selling North Highland car borne touring holidays. The port is being promoted as a Scandinavian gateway. A meeting will be set up (HC, Scrabster Harbour Authority and Northern Constabulary) to ensure that congestion will be avoided as far as possible as cars off loaded from the ship and travel through Thurso and beyond<sup>3</sup>.

Repair of John O Groats harbour is in hand. Engineers report will be complete by the end of April.

## **5 Community planning/community consultation**

Caithness Partnership continues to carry out work as part of a research project for the Carnegie UK Trust. Part of that work involves consultation on the themes contained in the Caithness Community Plan. The results of a recent survey on transport in the county demonstrated that there is an ongoing problem with bus transport; the service is not felt to meet community needs. It was agreed that a potential action on this would be to wait until the new councilors are in post then bring it up with them to encourage action at a local authority level<sup>4</sup>. Another suggestion was to bring the community councilors together with the service providers and alert people in the community that meetings are happening in their area. Proposal will be put to the Association of Community Councils to discuss<sup>5</sup>.

## **6 MS Society Caithness Branch transport needs**

Christobel Bannerman, representing the Caithness Neurological Society and the Caithness branch of the Multiple Sclerosis Society, reported that there are ongoing problems in finding transportation to take people to meetings and for therapy, social occasions, etc. There are a particularly high number of people suffering from MS in Caithness, much higher than the national average, making this very much a local issue. However, effort to fundraise for transport came up against the problem that there is still not enough of a critical mass of potential users to allow the funders to justify grants. The West of Caithness Community Transport Association was set up with a wider client base (23 other organisations on board) and still they cannot access Rural Transport Funding. Miss Bannerman felt that the bids are being judged against standards that the group cannot meet. It was suggested that she contact Yvonne Hendry of CVG to see if she could help find funding and other agencies might also help take a fresh look at the funding issue<sup>6</sup>.

## **7 AOCB**

Traffic data for the John O Groats area was circulated to members present for information.

A discussion on John O Groats took place – Scottish Development International is involved in inward investment work at JOG as part of a Scotland-wide study. The current owners of the John O Groats Hotel are participating in that.

## **8 Date of next meeting**

Friday 8 June 2007 in Thurso.

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<sup>3</sup> Action: E Marshall, E Sinclair

<sup>4</sup> ACTION: A. MacConnell

<sup>5</sup> ACTION: ?

<sup>6</sup> ACTION: E Sinclair, C Bannerman and C Campbell to meet and discuss