



CAITHNESS TRANSPORT FORUM

MINUTES OF MEETING IN THE PENTLAND HOTEL THURSO ON FRIDAY 8 JUNE 2007

Present: John Green, Association of Caithness Community Councils
Cllr Robert Coghill
Cllr Donald Mackay
Mike Lunan, Friends of the Far North Line
Cllr David Bremner
Sandy Mackie, Scrabster Harbour Trust
George Bruce, OBE, Caithness Partnership
John Banister, Wick Airport Consultative Committee
Angela Donaldson, HIAL
David Sutherland, Highland Council
John McFadzean, Transerv Scotland
Bert MacLeod, Federation of Small Businesses
Eann Sinclair, HIE Caithness & Sutherland
Anna MacConnell, Caithness Partnership

MINUTES of the last meeting were adopted as a true record – proposed by Mike Lunan, seconded by Angela Donaldson.

MATTERS ARISING:

Rail freight: Mike Lunan had had a discussion with Frank Roach regarding rail freight issues. His information was that in order to create the potential for freight on the far north line a better terminal is required in Inverness. Network Rail has indicated that ownership of Georgemas is in two hands – north of the line belongs to Alex Grant and south of the line is owned by Network Rail. Mr Lunan felt that the report produced by Elizabeth Marshall was very much based on the plans of Melborpon. He suggested that if CTF does anything on freight it should be done through the Highland Rail Partnership.

It was queried whether an Inverness freight yard appears in the HITRANS Regional Transport Strategy. Mike Lunan agreed to find out.¹

Mr Lunan suggested that freight that does not have to be loaded/unloaded at Inverness was less of a problem as previously loads of timber, pipes, and groceries (Safeway) have traveled on the line successfully. Questions were raised regarding the transferal of timber from road to rail at Kinbrace and why that had failed. Eann Sinclair agreed to find out.²

Community transport: Eann Sinclair reported that a meeting between himself, Coreen Campbell and Cristobel Bannerman regarding community transport is still to take place.³

NDA “top and tail” letter for CTF: copies of a letter from Dr Ian Roxburgh, Chief Executive of the NDA to the chairmen or chief executives of Somerfield Group, Asda Stores Ltd, The Co-operative Group and Tesco plc had been sent at the behest of the Transport Forum requesting that the stores engage with each other to agree an integrated approach to transport suggesting that rail haulage is an option that should be considered in the far north. Letters to the Managing Director of Highlands & Islands Airports Ltd asking questions about improvements to the infrastructure at Wick Airport and letters to Transport Scotland and the Director of Network Rail requesting information about improvements to the far north rail infrastructure had also been sent by Dr Roxburgh. CTF would be kept informed of responses to these letters.

John O Groats Harbour: John Green reported that work had been completed on repairs to Groats harbour.

Integrated timetable: Angela Donaldson requested a progress report on the wider distribution of timetables. Anna to chase up and report back.⁴

SE Caithness evening bus service: Anna had written to David Summers reinforcing the CTF view that this service is essential and that, as members had suggested, the statistics used to assess its efficacy could perhaps be reviewed. Eann Sinclair reported that the South East Caithness bus service is due to be restored on 3 evenings a week beginning in August. This news was welcomed by members.

UPDATES:

ROADS

John McFadzean reported that, in relation to the landslip at Scrabster, the geotechnical site work finished on 30th May, 2007 and a report on the findings will be prepared for Transport Scotland. In the meantime temporary traffic lights will remain in situ for safety reasons and Scotand Transerv will continue to assist the harbour master

¹ ACTION: M LUNAN

² ACTION: E SINCLAIR

³ ACTION: E SINCLAIR, C CAMPBELL & C BANNERMAN

⁴ ACTION: A. MACCONNELL

providing operatives attending at peak times to operate lights manually. For safety reasons the double track cannot be restored until survey and stabilization work is completed.

Sandy Mackie stated that traffic through the harbour is due to increase dramatically because of the Norrona landings in a few weeks time and urgent action to restore the double lane road is required. The Trust will write to Transport Minister Stuart Stevenson with this request. Members agreed that the CTF should support the Trust expressing concern at the time it is taking to make progress in this matter. Anna to consult with Sandy Mackie about content of the letter.⁵

Geotechnical site work at Berriedale will be completed 12th June and report is being prepared for submission to Transport Scotland. Tenders for Phase 2 of the Navidale/Helsmdale section of the A9 are due and Scotland Transerv expects to award a contract soon. Robert Coghill enquired whether anything could be done to improve the opportunities for lorries and other large vehicles to get off the road to let traffic past on sections further north, for example the lay-by at Ousdale which was currently gated. Mr McFadzean said the problem lies in that if that were left open then Scotland Transerv would be held responsible for keeping the redundant section of old road open.

The traffic lights at Orlig Street in Thurso continue to cause problems. Mr McFadzean informed the group that a report has gone to Transport Scotland suggesting a recommended change.

The Thurso-Scrabster section of the A9 along with improvements to Orlig Street and ST John's Street in Thurso have both been removed from this year's funding plan and deferred because of a funding issue. Members suggested that a request to reconsider this decision and make a plea for a hasty solution to the traffic lights problem should be included in a CTF letter to Transport Scotland (Gordon Sinclair, Network Manager for Transport Scotland).⁶

A final decision has been taken on the new location of the snow gate in south east Caithness. Community concerns remained but it had been made clear by Northern Constabulary that subject to appropriate conditions, people would be allowed access through the gate if they lived or had family nearby.

Members felt that the political change in the Scottish Parliament is likely to have an effect on funding issues. The pledge in the SNP manifesto to dual the entire A9 was unlikely to happen but that CTF should invite the new Transport Minister, Stewart Stevenson, to travel north to hear about issues in the area. A copy of the Caithness Transport vision to be sent to all new Highland Councilors.⁷

RAIL

⁵ ACTION: A. MACCONNELL

⁶ ACTION: AMACCONNELL

⁷ ACTION: AMACCONNELL

Mike Lunan reported that the first of the refurbished 158's are to reach Inverness next week. Additional vehicles will come into service at intervals thereafter. The refurbished rolling stock should be more comfortable and perform better.

SEA

Sandy Mackie updated that the first visit of the Norrona will be on 18 June. Indicative statistics demonstrate that 2000 people and 500 cars will disembark at Scrabster during the programme if visits. A welcome reception will be held on the first visit. A 20 strong team of national representatives are expected from Faroe including ministerial level officials.

AIR

As of the end of March, Loganair now operate their schedule from Edinburgh to Wick, arriving at 1230 and back out to Edinburgh at 1300. There is no longer a service North from Wick to either Sumburgh or Kirkwall.

Eastern Airways business continues to increase at Wick with 3 services per day to and from Aberdeen. The Air Discount Scheme has certainly contributed to that and it may be possible to extrapolate more accurate information from the statistics relating to ADS now that Eastern Airways can participate directly in the scheme.

The Popular Flying Association's only Scottish rally had been held out of Wick Airport. The Association was delighted with the high visibility (100km) available and the event had been a great success. The flyers had bought many local products while in the area such as Old Pulteney whisky and Caithness cheese.

A question was raised about bad weather landings at Wick. John Banister responded that the Wick Airport Consultative Committee had been pushing issue for this for some time. An economic case had not yet been made for improvements to the instrument landing system and it will be at least 10 years until the CAA will consider allowing use of GPS as a landing aid. The potential for using high intensity lamps is being explored as well as other possible solutions. The point was raised that with global warming the problem of fog may become more acute and impact the numbers of flights being cancelled or landings aborted. John Green, George Bruce and Mike Lunan had all met with Dr Ian Roxburgh Chief Executive of NDA a year ago and the problem of cancelled landings due to fog had been discussed as a major disincentive to inward investment hence Ian Roxburgh's letter to HIAL about the need for investment in the airport.

PUBLIC BUS SERVICES

A consultation exercise into service delivery being carried out by Caithness Partnership has shown that members of the public were generally dissatisfied with the public bus service available in the county. The Forum seems to people to be the most likely body to hope to deal with the problem. Rapsons had applied to some of the Highland Councilors for support to gain a grant of £2.75M to upgrade their fleet of coaches and buses. It was agreed that David Sutherland, Caithness Ward Manager, would invite

Warren Mitchell to present to the Caithness councilors and Caithness Transport Forum members regarding Rapsons plans.⁸

It was suggested that further consultation work is required to determine the extent of the public transport problem and how it may be addressed. A sub group of CTF (David Sutherland, Eann Sinclair, Donnie Mackay, David Bremner, Robert Coghill, John Green and Anna MacConnell) would meet, possibly with David Summers, to put a case forward to HITRANS for funding for consultation work. In the meantime Anna would write to the community councils and determine their views.⁹

AOCB

Mike Lunan has been appointed to the Rail Industry Advisory Committee. Journeyshare Caithness is due to be launched mid- June.

DONM

Friday 31 August 2007 in Wick Town Hall at 2.30pm.

⁸ ACTION: D SUTHERLAND

⁹ ACTION: A MACCONNELL