



CAITHNESS TRANSPORT FORUM

MINUTES OF MEETING IN THE PENTLAND HOTEL THURSO ON FRIDAY 31 August 2007

Present: John Green, Association of Caithness Community Councils
Cllr Robert Coghill
Cllr Donald Mackay
Mike Lunan, Friends of the Far North Line
Louise Smith, HITRANS
Cllr Bill Fernie
George Bruce, OBE, Caithness Partnership
John Banister, Wick Airport Consultative Committee
Angela Donaldson, HIAL
David Sutherland, Highland Council
Eann Sinclair, HIE Caithness & Sutherland
Coreen Campbell, Caithness Community Transport
Anna MacConnell, Caithness Partnership
Stuart Bell, Highland Council
Howard Brindley, HITRANS

1 APOLOGIES: Sandy Mackie, Scrabster Harbour Authority
Vida Swanson, Highland Country Buses
John McFadzean, Transerv Scotland
Bert MacLeod, Federation of Small Businesses
Campbell Stewart, Highland Council
Chief Inspector John McDonald, Northern Constabulary

2 MINUTES of the last meeting were adopted as a true record – proposed by Angela Donaldson, seconded Cllr Donald Mackay

3 MATTERS ARISING:

Rail freight: Mike Lunan was optimistic, based on information from Highland Rail Partnership, that there would be rail freight contracts working into Inverness by the end of this year.

HRP has been working with several estates and owners of forest blocks to get timber freight onto the far north line again.

Some positive responses had been received from Sir Ian Roxburgh of the NDA from supermarket chains indicating that they would be willing to discuss using the rail for freight to the north.

Bus services: David Sutherland reported that Warren Mitchell was keen to meet with the Caithness Transport Forum and Councillors to discuss Rapson's plans to improve the bus fleet (Bus Routes Development Grant Scheme). David to arrange meeting.¹

4.1 CAITHNESS BUS AND COACH NETWORK DEVELOPMENT SCHEME

Howard Brindley, HITRANS, explained that the Bus Routes Development Grant Scheme is available to pump-prime development of arterial routes. £2M is available for schemes in and around Inverness, on in Fortwilliam and in Caithness. The funding will help reduce journey time, improve the quality of service and provide a marketing package. The proposals will deliver an increased quality of provision for travelers on the following services:

- 958 Scrabster to Inverness via Thurso and Wick
- 82 Thurso to Wick via Halkirk
- 77 Wick to John O Groats via Gills Bay
- New service for the 71 for Wick Town (linking the housing estates with the Retail Park south and Tesco)

Forum members informed Mr Brindley that there is much anecdotal evidence of local dissatisfaction with the bus service throughout the county and lack of information about services. Members were unsure how bus companies determine local need and whose responsibility it is to put timetables into bus stops.

Cllr Donald Mackay raised the issue of a bus service for Norrona passengers into Thurso from Scrabster. To date an ad hoc shuttle service has been paid for through the Highland Council local discretionary fund. There is no regular provision. He requested that a regular service for Norrona passengers be added into the Scheme.

It will be the end of next year before HITRANS will know whether funding has been approved from Scottish Executive for the plan.

4.2 STRATEGIC ROADS STRATEGY

Mr Brindley reported that a strategy is being developed regarding strategic roads including strategic trunk roads (A9 north) and suggested work on the Berriedale Brae and A99 is included. It will be another few months before the work is concluded. George Bruce raised the issue of the landslip at the Berriedale Braes and the fact that another slip might render the road impassable. The nearest alternative in or out of Caithness, or for ferry transport to and from Orkney, would be Strath Halladale. That (single track) road has suffered flood damage this summer and a weight restriction has

¹ ACTION: D Sutherland

only recently been lifted from it and is not a realistic alternative for Caithness and Orkney traffic.

4.3 HITRANS CAPITAL PROGRAMME

A programme of capital works amounting to £1,200,000 has been approved. Members were disappointed to note that the projects listed in the programme are all based either on the west coast, the islands or in Inverness.

4.4 LOCAL AND SIGNIFICANT ROADS

A programme of minor roads improvements is planned. 2 potential candidates are in Caithness – Castletown to Wick road and the north coast road to John O Groats. Mr Brindley explained that ERDF funding will be sought for these improvements. Members informed him that the JOG to Castletown road needs strip widening, the JOG to Wick road requires a series of minor schemes on either side of Keiss and that there will be increased traffic to Quoybrae due to the closure of Thurso Auction Mart. A problem at Glengolly, between Thurso and Halkirk, was highlighted where the road is too narrow for two buses to pass. It is to be noted that there is an increase of traffic through Castletown from the Gills ferry. Although this route is 5 miles longer it is preferred by lorry drivers in particular as being a better road for driving south than via Wick.

5 HIGHLAND LOCAL TRANSPORT STRATEGY

A draft document will be delivered by HC staff via David Sutherland to local Councillors. David agreed to forward this to Anna for CTF members when it is received.²

6 HALKIRK COMMUNITY COUNCIL REQUEST FOR SUPPORT FROM CTF

Halkirk CC had requested support from the CTF for their efforts to get improvements at Georgemas Junction and Halkirk Station reopened. A paper will be submitted to the next meeting.³

7 STEWART STEVENSON, SCOTTISH TRANSPORT MINISTER'S VISIT TO CAITHNESS

Stewart Stevenson has agreed to visit Caithness to hear about transport issues in the county. A draft agenda was proposed and would be fleshed out in consultation with the Minister's staff. It was anticipated that all CTF members will have an opportunity to meet the minister and that invitation will be extended to the local councilors in due course.⁴ John Laing (HC representative on HITRANS) to be invited.⁵

8 UPDATES:

AIR: Angela Donaldson reported that the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) has now approved the use of GPS landing systems in UK airports. A significantly increased number of flights have been lost to haar – in 2006 59 flights were lost during May, June,

² ACTION: D Sutherland

³ ACTION: B Manson

⁴ ACTION: A MacConnell

⁵ ACTION: J Green

July and August. In 2007 there have already been 52 lost flights to the end of July. Conditions seem to be bringing warm weather earlier in the year extending the haar season from April to November rather than as previously June, July and August. At the moment, the Instrument Approach Procedures at Wick allow aircraft to descend to around 350 feet above ground level before initiating a missed approach if the runway is not visible at that point. The availability of improved landing aid, either, GPS or ILS, may improve the minima down to 220 – 250 feet, but again, that would be subject to confirmation by carrying out a detailed technical feasibility study. An analysis of the number of flights which may be able to operate if the minimum descent height could be improved would more accurately identify the benefits of an improved landing aid, but it was accepted that in conditions of haar, there would be no improvement in the landing rate. Angela reported that blind landing systems are only available at major airports and would cost in excess of £10M. GPS installation in aircraft would be a significant investment from Loganair and Eastern Airways of £20,000 per aircraft. An up to date analysis of flights disrupted by weather will be circulated by email.⁶

Angela circulated the most recent flight statistics demonstrating that the use of schedules services continues to improve. A 22% increase in use of the Aberdeen service has shown since January 07 showing a month on month increase of 100% since the equivalent period in 2004.

ROADS: John McFadzean had previously indicated that delays in resolving the work at Scrabster Brae are due to difficulties pertaining to the land above the landslip. Anna had written to Transport Scotland on the CTF's behalf regarding the Scrabster landslip and a letter of response was circulated which concluded "If agreement can be reached with the owner of the land on which the slip occurred it is hoped that remedial work to the slope will commence in September/October taking a maximum of 8 weeks to complete. If the engineering assessment concludes that more complex works are required then this will push back the start and completion dates.....the situation will continue to be monitored, but it is unlikely that it will be safe to remove the temporary traffic signals until the remedial works have been completed....Scotland TranServ has been manually controlling the traffic lights at Scrabster at peak traffic periods to minimize delays."

The Berridale Braes survey is complete. Gordon Sinclair to be contacted for fuller information.⁷

RAIL: Mike Lunan reported that a second refurbished 158 is now in service and this has resulted in a big improvement in comfort.

SEA: Sandy Mackie had provided an update paper in advance of the meeting and this was circulated. Sandy had reported that the figures for the Norrona traffic (final visit took

⁶ ACTION: A Donaldson, A MacConnell

⁷ ACTION: A MacConnell

place on 27 August) were excellent. The total statistics for the 11 week programme, inwards and outwards) are as follows:

Passengers	6,060
Cars	1,334
Motor homes	289
Motorcycles	174
Bicycles	72
Buses	13

Both Scrabster Harbour Authority and the Smyril Line were reported to be delighted with the initial programme. A similar programme is planned for 2008 and the Trust will meet with the Smyril Line to see how the service can be strengthened and improved.

9 AOCB:

Repairs to the road at Upper High Street, Wick, were causing delays. Stuart Bell determined that the work is being carried out under the auspices of Highland Council. He was encouraged by the members to seek early completion. In addition Transerv is to be made aware of potholes at Ousdale.⁸

Sutherland Transport Vision – copies of this document were circulated to members. Mike Lunan suggested that the North Rail line could be better marketed for tourism and he would be keen to see HIE encourage grant relevant recipients to provide information to tourists on the rail journey.

10 DONM: Friday 2 November in Thurso at 10.30am

⁸ ACTION: A. MacConnell