

**NOTES OF SPECIAL MEETING OF CAITHNESS TRANSPORT FORUM**  
**WICK TOWN HALL**  
**FRIDAY 18 JANUARY 2008**

**Present:**

Mr John Green, Chairman Caithness Transport Forum  
Mr George Bruce OBE, Caithness Partnership Limited  
Mr Mark Norton, DoRLAG  
Mr David Sutherland, Highland Council Ward Manager  
Mr John Banister, Wick Airport Authority Committee/Caithness Chamber of Commerce  
Mr Campbell Stewart, TECS, Highland Council  
Mr Alex MacManus, Highland Council Ward Manager's Assistant  
Cllr Robert Coghill, Highland Council  
Mr Mike Lunan, Friends of the Far North Line  
Mrs Coreen Campbell, Caithness Rural Transport  
Mr William Manson, Halkirk Community Council  
Ms Louise Smith, HITRANS  
Mr Bert Macleod, Caithness & Highland Association of Small Businesses  
Miss Donna Stewart, UKAEA  
Mr Sandy Mackie, Scrabster Harbour Trust  
Mr Eric Larnach, South East Caithness Development Group  
Miss Angela Donaldson, Highlands & Islands Airport Authority  
Mr Iain Moncrieff, TECS, Highland Council  
Mr Stephen Canning, MVA Consultancy  
Mr Scott Leitham, MVA Consultancy

**Apologies:**

Mr Randall Bargelt, Nuclear Decommissioning Authority  
Mrs Carroll Buxton, HIE Caithness & Sutherland  
Mr Eann Sinclair, HIE Caithness & Sutherland  
Cllr David Flear, Highland Council  
Cllr Bill Fernie, Highland Council  
Cllr Graeme Smith, Highland Council  
Cllr John Rosie, Highland Councillor  
Mr Ron Peddie, UKAEA

**1. Transport Infrastructure Priorities for Caithness – Caithness Infrastructure Draft Study: Presentation by Scott Leitham, MVA Consultancy**

Mr Green welcomed everyone to this special meeting of Caithness Transport Forum and introduced Mr Scott Leitham and Mr Stephen Canning, MVA Consultants, who were appointed by the Caithness Partnership to undertake a study to prioritise the transport requirements of Caithness. The aim of the study is to identify which transport improvements best support the 20 year Vision for Caithness & North Sutherland and to deliver the recommendations as to how these improvements can be

progressed. The report will also feed into Transport Scotland's on-going Strategic Transport Projects Review.

The study seeks to answer the following questions:-

What transport infrastructure improvements are required to make the Vision for Caithness and North Sutherland happen?

What new/improved infrastructure is needed for each item in the Vision?

The priority of the Transport Forum is to stimulate inward investment in Caithness. As such, MVA were requested to prioritise the improvements needed over 5 years, 10 years, 15 years and 20 years in order to support the developments listed in the Vision.

What other additional improvements are required to make the Vision happen that are not included on the infrastructure list?

The structure of the presentation is as follows:-

- Progress to date
- Assessment of Options
- Initial recommendations

A copy of the consultants draft report to date was distributed to everyone at the meeting. The report is an overview of the economic issues affecting Caithness and the general links between transport and economic development. What are the main issues the vision is looking to tackle and what can transport contribute to issues post Dounreay.

What are the key transport problems and issues – define key problems and issues by mode of transport –

Car/HGV

Coach

Train

Air

Ports & Shipping

Look at travel times, fares, service frequencies, etc

Develop STAG like planning objectives based on these problems and issues.

STAG – To follow the STAG Guidelines means to step back and take an objective look and present possible solutions.

### Progress to Date

- Commission, initial meetings & consultations– w/b 10 December
- Email based stakeholder consultation - to date
- Initial draft report issued – 16 January
- Development of appraisal framework & assessment of options

### Draft Report to Date (1)

#### **Overview of economic issues affecting Caithness**

- General links between transport and economic development – STAG EALI
- Overview of Caithness economy
  - Employment & other indicators
  - Population and economic trends / projections
- What are the main issues the Vision is looking to tackle?
  - Dounreay issues
- Evidence that transport is a constraint of local economic development
  - Evidence of perceptions of remoteness
  - Inward investment / tourist
  - Relative economic disadvantage

### Draft Report to Date (2)

#### **Key Transport Problems & Issues**

- Define key problems and issues by mode
  - Car / HGV
  - Coach
  - Train
  - Air
  - Ports & Shipping
- Travel times, service frequencies and fares to key destinations
- Develop STAG-like planning objectives based on these problems & issues

### Key Economic Issues & Challenges

- Decommissioning of Dounreay
  - Loss of direct and indirect high-value employment
  - Associated impact on community and local economy
    - Potential loss of skilled labour force
    - Resulting out-migration and its impact on the sustainability of local communities and services

- Developing indigenous business and attracting new investment
  - Building on skills base & other assets
- Creating a positive climate for business and investment - business confidence
- Vision for Caithness & List of Schemes
- Focus on Inter-Regional transport
- STAG Planning Objectives reflect this

*Louise Smith said that for example with marine development it would be vital to know that a transport structure was in place for moving large pieces of equipment*

#### Proposed Transport Measures

- A99 through Keiss;
- Thurso Bypass
- Targeted programme of safety improvements on strategic road links;
- A9 Targeted programme of 2+1 enhancements (eg Black Isle);
- A9 Targeted programme of local bypasses (eg Golspie, Brora);
- A9 Berriedale Braes bypass scheme;
- A9 facilities upgrade - eg services;
- Far North Line Improvements (achieving a 30 min JT Reduction);
- Far North Line – ‘Room For Growth JT savings (points & level crossings) - 11mins saving;
- Dornoch Rail Link;
- Inter-modal Rail Freight Handling Depot at Georgemas;
- Georgemas Chord;
- Halkirk Station - Local Scheme??
- Extension of Rail Line to Wick Harbour;
- Extension of Rail Line to Scrabster Harbour;
- Fares Support policies;
- Replacement / refurbishment of train rolling stock;
- Peak hour Thurso – Inverness (with connection to Wick) express coach service;
- Integrated rail / bus options - improving overall PT journey times;
- Wick Airport ILS - aircraft landing in all weathers;
- Wick Airport - wider range of destinations;
- Wick Airport - 'permanence' of services;
- Plans at Wick harbour - compete with Aberdeen & Inverness, oil and gas support;
- Plans at Scrabster harbour - fishing & freight, oil & gas support

*Tourists – important that there is an improvement in the services provided for tourists – e.g. petrol stations, more laybys etc.*

*Mike Lunan asked to remove the word “refurbishment” from line – Replacement/refurbishment of train rolling stock as we are presently half way through a refurbishment programme.*

*Important there is ongoing dialogue between the bus companies and train companies to ensure improved connections.*

*Under Wick Airport – change to – “Improve landing in difficult conditions” and “Improve regularity on scheduled services”*

*Cllr Coghill asked why Gills Bay was not mentioned. Consultants understood that this project was already agreed and about to happen. As 90% of passengers go through Gills Bay it was stressed that it was very important that it is mentioned in the report.*

*Mr Green also asked that Orkney be included in the report.*

*The leisure aspect of both harbours should also be mentioned. Mr Mackie said that the leisure aspect was more appropriate for Wick Harbour and not Scrabster. However he asked for support for renewables for both harbours as well as capacity building for possible fabrication work. Launching devices are required.*

#### Transport Objectives

- reducing inter-regional travel times;
- improving 'lifeline' dependability on strategic routes;
- improving travel time reliability;
- increasing transport connectivity;
- tackling perceptions of remoteness;
- improving travel safety;
- increase range of freight handling capabilities;
- improving 'quality' of inter-regional travel, including en-route facilities;
- and
- improving strategic links to ports & airports.

*Louise – Look at whole commuting issue for businesses from the south – make sure it is suitable/viable to travel up and back in one day. (Consultants looking at possibility of extra Edinburgh flight)*

*Bert Macleod – it is important that reliable trains are available (the train wouldn't start on 4 separate occasions this month already)*

### Approach to Option Appraisal (1)

- Considered each element of the Vision in turn
  - What is its significance / scale in terms of economic impact?
  - To what extent would each ‘transport objective’ contribute to its realisation?
- Created a ‘weighting’ for each ‘transport objective’ to reflect its overall significance in contributing to the realisation of the Vision?
- How successful is each proposed transport measure in contributing to the ‘weighted’ transport objectives?

### Approach to Option Appraisal (2)

- Allocated a cost band to each transport measure
- Ranked the transport measures
  - Absolute contribution to the Vision
  - ‘value for money’ contribution to the Vision
  - See spreadsheet

<b>Scheme</b>	<b>Rank Absolute</b>	<b>Rank Value for money</b>
Coach:- peak hour express service – allowing a ‘working day’ in Inverness	11	1
Air – ‘permanence’ of services	15	2
Wick Airport ILS – aircraft landing in all weathers	4	3
Targeted programme of 2+1 enhancements (eg Black Isle)	1	4
Air – wider range of destinations	8	5
PT – integrated rail/bus options – improving overall PT journey times	16	6
Intermodal Rail Freight Handling Depot at Georgemas	5	7
Targeted programme of safety improvements	9	8
A9 facilities upgrade – eg services	20	9
Extension of Rail Line to Wick Harbour	6	10
Targeted programme of local bypasses (eg Golspie, Brora)	3	11
A0 Berriedale Braes Scheme – Inland Bypass	13	12
Far North Line Improvements (30 min JT Reduction)	10	13
Plans Wick – compete with Aberdeen & Inverness, oil and gas support	12	14
Dornoch Rail Link	2	15
Extension of Rail Line to Scrabster Harbour	6	16
Fares support	17	17
A99 through Keiss – local scheme?	22	18
Plans Scrabster – fishing and freight, oil and gas support	14	19
Thurso Bypass	18	20
Georgemas Chord	19	21
Refurbishment/replacement of rail rolling stock	21	22
SW Room for Growth JT savings (points and level crossings) – 11 mins	23	23
Halkirk Station – Local Scheme?? (associated with Georgemas Chord)	24	24

Above table – first column rated in order of importance, second column rated in order of cost effectiveness.

*Louise asked for an explanation of how the costings were worked out for air.*

*Bert Macleod mentioned the site of the old mart in Thurso and the possibility of it being redeveloped re Thurso Railway Station. Consultants interested to know situation with the Mart.*

*Mark Norton – freight is a critical part – capacity needs to be taken into consideration also.*

*George Bruce said that he had attended the transport conference in Glasgow recently and it is obvious that the bulk of the expenditure for transport goes and will continue to go to the central belt. It is therefore important that we campaign as strongly as possible for expenditure in our area.*

*Re Thurso bypass – meeting felt upgrade to A9 was a greater priority.*

*Re Golspie/Brora bypasses –the view of meeting was that this proposal was not as important as the stretches of road between Golspie and Brora, Helmsdale/Port Gower and Borgue/Wick were three stretches that were in need of urgent upgrade. It was felt that there was more chance of attracting monies to upgrade smaller sections of the road. This should be within the 5 year programme and we should highlight a list of five areas that are “doable schemes”. This would be much more cost effective and would improve the road, cut down on journey time and improve safety for drivers/passengers.*

*It was agreed when doing the PR that it would be a good idea to arrange for two Steven’s lorries to be photographed passing each other in opposite directions at Port Gower where the road is dangerously narrow for two lorries to pass at once.*

*Campbell Stewart agreed to provide one or two possible areas that would be a priority for upgrade and also to put the Consultants in touch with his colleagues at Scotland Transerv.*

*David Sutherland suggested separating out the ranking in the spreadsheet list to –*

*Road*

*Shipping*

*Rail*

*Air*

*And then look at each one individually. He asked for top 3 priorities under each individual heading*

*George Bruce/Sandy Mackie/Angela Donaldson*

*Scrabster Harbour Trust – The bulk of oil based business comes from West of Shetland. Similarly the airport benefits from West of Shetland.*

*George Bruce and Bert Macleod – important to look at the PR side to make sure we get a slice of the funding.*

*John Green – once we get ??Robert?? and it is to our liking then we can think about PR.*

*Angela – need to have strong local input to what our transport needs are – this should be decided by people who are from/living in the area.*

*A99 mentioned only once on spreadsheet and this road is listed as one of the most dangerous roads.*

*David Sutherland again reiterated the importance of separating out the spreadsheet list into separate transport categories.*

#### So What?

- Caithness is in a unique position and has historically suffered from a lack of investment in transport
- Investment in physical infrastructure and services is a key component of an overall package of measures to sustain and develop Caithness
- This Scoping Study has demonstrated how investment in transport could contribute to the Vision for Caithness – prioritisation
- It is essential that Caithness stakeholders make representations to ensure these issues are given due consideration in STPR etc

*Louise – could we have banding instead of ranking – Don't want to create tensions locally.*

#### What Next – Recommendations (1)

- Consider Caithness STAG EALI & WEBS Study – the case for Scottish Government investment will rely heavily on this
- Wick Airport – ILS, increased flights, permanence, timetabling – business confidence / remoteness
- Promote A9 Inverness – Caithness 'Route Action Plan'
  - prioritisation of safety measures;
  - prioritisation of climbing lane / 2+1 for platoon dispersal and journey time reliability / journey quality;
  - examine potential bypasses en-route
- Promote Inverness – Caithness PT Corridor study – assess rail and coach options to improve journey times and facilitate day trips

*Angela asked for the word “route” to be removed above.  
Under Promote Inverness – Mike Lunan asked for bullet point for rail and one for road.*

#### What Next – Recommendations (2)?

- Ports & Harbours – economic potential study?
  - Be proactive in development opportunities
- Scapa Flow (national Issue) - ‘What could it mean for Caithness?’ study? – how to capitalise
- Far North Line Freight – related to above
  - Geogemas multi-modal facility market assessment – associated line improvements
- Highland tourist surveys – perceptions of Caithness – Dounreay employee Focus Groups

*Re economic potential study – Sandy Mackie reported that Scrabster Harbour Trust are about to have an economic study done – presently out to tender.*

*Re Highland tourist Surveys – David Sutherland and Donna Stewart suggested contacting Caithness Horizons and North Highland Initiative – NH Tourism Group re tourist surveys – probably already completed by these groups.*

*Mike Lunan – Road bullet point then rail bullet point then railway infrastructure.  
Scott agreed to put in railway infrastructure.*

*Campbell Stewart – A9 corridor road link – comfort reliability, safety most important – don’t want to confuse message  
Road improvements are urgent, rail is a longterm vision.*

*George Bruce – despite recent submissions from Caithness HITRANS appears to have ignored it all.*

#### Final Reporting

- Feedback today
- Final Report to follow
- Comprehensive Executive Summary
- Questions / Observations??

*Scott Leitham – document will lay down all arguments for better slice of funding and to raise awareness of the need for investment north of Inverness.*

*MVA will report to CTF by end of month.*

*Full report to Transport Scotland plus Minister.*

**3. Dornoch Rail Link – Proposed New Route and STAG Appraisal: Presentation by Mark Norton, DoRLAG**

The Dornoch Firth Rail Crossing – background behind this changed dramatically since 2004 suggestion.

Have tried to get professional consideration to see if a) feasible and b) do study to look at operational benefits and costs.

One option would be to leave as it is, concentrate on improving existing line – untenable in long-term compared to improved road.

With improvements to other parts of line train journey could be 2 hrs 30 mins – could even go down to 2 hrs 10 mins.

Engineering cost of scheme - £97M

With design fees etc included - £118M