



CAITHNESS TRANSPORT FORUM

MINUTES OF MEETING IN THE PENTLAND HOTEL THURSO ON 7 MARCH 2008

PRESENT: John Green (chair), Association of Caithness Community Councils
Cllr Robert Coghill
Cllr Donald Mackay
Sandy Mackie, Scrabster Harbour Trust
John Banister, Wick Airport Consultative Committee
Angela Donaldson, HIAL
Coreen Campbell, Caithness Community Transport
Veda Swanson, Rapsons
Eric Larnach, Initiative at the Edge
Alex McManus, Highland Council
Mark Norton, Dornoch Rail Link Action Group
Donna Stewart, UKAEA
Ian Moncrief, Highland Council
Billy Manson, Halkirk Community Council
Louise Smith, HITRANS/HIE
Gordon Doull, Wick Harbour Trust
Anna MacConnell, Caithness Partnership

IN ATTENDANCE: Dave Duthie, Director HITRANS

- 1 **APOLOGIES:** Mike Lunan, John McFadzean, George Bruce, Eann Sinclair, Carol Gunn, David Bremner, David Sutherland, Bert MacLeod
- 2 **MINUTES** of the last meeting (2 November 2007) were adopted as a true record – proposed by Cllr Donald Mackay, seconded Coreen Campbell
- 3 **PRESENTATION FROM DAVE DUTHIE, HITRANS: “THE WAY FORWARD”**
Dave Duthie, HITRANS, was welcomed to the meeting and during a presentation he raised the following points;

- From now on councils will delivery local schemes, Highland Council getting an extra £1.8M that had previously been awarded to HITRANS. That funding is not ring-fenced within Highland Council budgets. The Council will spend it in alignment with its Single Outcome Agreement with Government, and to meet the government agenda.
- A Strategic Transport Projects Review is ongoing which is looking at national and regional priorities (benefits to the nation at a regional level)
- There is currently a split of 95% of the population with 5% of road mileage – regionally this has a negative impact on rural areas
- Government has 5 new priorities and the regional strategy must fit closely with those – transport is not written down as a priority as there is an argument to be made that transport is important to all the priorities eg, transport is integral to growing the economy
- HITRANS' vision and objectives are to enhance the region's viability, improve interconnectivity of the whole region to strategic services as destinations and to allow the region to compete within the wider economy
- There are 4 national gateways (question was raised whether Scrabster is a national gateway now that there are international ferries landing there – Dave Duthie to seek the definition of a national gateway and report back)

ACTION:DD

- Rail priorities - links between Inverness, the central belt ad Aberdeen, improved links on Far North Line, expand Ivernet commuter network
- Road priorities – major investment on A82, investment in arteries (A9 north, A95, A83 and spinal route), remove pinch points, improve access for heavy vehicles
- Air priorities – secure link to London hub, provide licensed airport on Skye, support development f a sustainable fare structure for all
- Ferry priorities – improve network and provide effective links, provide new ferries or fixed links
- Bus priorities better integration and information on services, accessibility and response to demand, promote bus priority and park & ride facilities
- Active travel priorities – deliver and promote active travel to work, enhance infrastructure and facilities

In response members raised the following questions/points:

- the rail corridor should be looked at as a whole and best value for money considered by comparing £100M for improving rail links to Caithness and Orkney as opposed to £90M on the A82. Journey times could be improved on the FNL on an incremental basis (35-40 mins). The STAG appraisal had identified economic and social benefits of a Dornoch Rail link.
- Where does port infrastructure development fit with growing economic prosperity? – there is limited opportunity in terms of investment as the public sector will not invest and DD was not aware of significant investment being planned. A special mechanism had been found to develop Rosyth. HITRANS is setting up a Freight Quality Partnership which will be looking at ports.

- What different grant schemes are now available through HITRANS and how can these be accessed? – there is no capital grants scheme available through ITRANS any more as this element of the budget (£3.5M) has gone to Highland Council and is not ring-fenced. HITRANS has a research budget and some funding for revenue projects (integrated services)
- What will happen to the capital budget in future? HITRANS is arguing that it needs a 10% slice of the national budget but there is a view that the regional transport partnerships are an extra tier of government
- Because of the importance of renewable energy to the government might links to the north be entered as part of the National Planning Framework? Caithness Transport Infrastructure study by MVA needs to be fed into the Scottish National Transport Projects Review **(done)**

4 BUS SERVICES

A meeting has been arranged with representatives of Rapsons, Highland Council and the Caithness Transport Forum in Inverness on 10 April. All CTF members with an interest are welcome to attend. Community consultation work is currently being carried out in Canisbay and Dunnet area by members of the local community working with Caithness Partnership to properly identify problems and issues relating to public transport and access to other services in that area. The findings of a household survey will be available in a few weeks time.

Extra capital is required for new buses in Caithness. An opportunity for getting funding was lost when trials found that the bus sizes on offer though grant aid did not fit with the contractors needs (sharing of buses between Dounreay contract and local services). Members felt that trials should have been carried out on the public services (as it is the public who are more dependent on buses) rather than Dounreay contracts. It is unlikely that the level of investment that was available will be ever available in the future and a good opportunity has been lost to the county.

5 TRANSPORT FOR DEVELOPMENT – CAITHNESS INFRASTRUCTURE STUDY

The study was completed on 6 March. A summary had been handed to the Transport Minister at Holyrood by members of the Forum and a representative of MVA Consultants. John Banister had taken the opportunity to ask the Minister to write to the CAA about the likelihood of GPS systems being used in UK airports and potential for trialing the system at Wick. He had not yet had a response. The Minister had appeared positive about the study, highlighting the growing importance of the north in national terms for the marine energy developments in the Pentland Firth and the possibility of a Scapa Flow trans-shipment hub. Mr Stevenson suggested the study go forward to be fed into the National Strategic Transport Projects Review process.

Copies of the study have been sent to Orkney Islands Council, HITRANS, Highland Council, HIE, MP/MSP and will be handed to Alex Salmond at a meeting

on 19 March. A copy to be sent to Inglis Lyon, Managing Director, HIAL.
(ACTION: AM)

6 MEETING BETWEEN EAST CAITHNESS AND ST MARGARET'S HOPE REPRESENTATIVES

Members of the Forum had been invited to attend a meeting in St Margaret's Hope, Orkney, with the St Margaret's Hope Pier Trustees, Pentland Ferries, Orkney Islands Council and Orkney Tourism Group. A note of the meeting is currently circulated for information. It was reported that St Margaret's Hope Pier Trustees were keen that a 365 day service to the mainland could be achieved, using Wick Harbour when weather precludes landing at Gills, and that Wick Harbour Authority is keen to have its link span installed. The link span will not be for exclusive use of Pentland Ferries.

The Forum's activities in this area (Gills ferry) were questioned as there could be a danger of displacement of current provision at Scrabster. It was confirmed that the Forum's aims are to promote transport infrastructure development and that there will inevitably be competition between different modes of transport and transport provision. However, in this instance Pentland Ferries' new catamaran will be operating from the end of May irrespective of any input from the Forum. The Forum's role in this case is to try and ensure that something is done about the dilapidated state of Gills harbour, the Caithness end of the service. In its current poor state it leaves visitors with a bad memory of Caithness, which will be exacerbated when the purpose built new boat begins operating, St Margaret's Hope marshalling area is renovated, a new terminal building put up and the whole area landscaped and improved from a tourism perspective. Another meeting of the group is to be held in the summer.

It was noted that road equivalent tariffs (RET) may have a negative impact on the air services. RET (to which the Government has committed £22M over 3 years) allows for people coming into the area as well as leaving it whereas the Air Discount Scheme is only available to residents.

It was noted that a weight restriction has been imposed on the Seatter/Canisbay road (7.5 tonnes) but improvements are taken account of in the HC Roads & Maintenance budget.

7 UPDATES:

ROADS: planning gain may be available as the low/medium level nuclear waste facility proposed at Dounreay goes through the planning process.

RAIL: Mark Norton had attended Scotland's Rail future AGM and a report of that meeting will be available to Forum members. Highland Rail Partnership has voted to amalgamate with HITRANS.

An invitation to join Friends of the Far North Line has been received by the Forum. Both DoRLG and FFNL are represented on the Forum. It was agreed will retain the status quo and not join either organisation at this stage.

SEA: Scrabster Harbour's first phase of development is at the options appraisal stage. The Trust has commissioned an economic impact assessment for the harbour. SHA is involved in an EU project looking into strengthening of marine transport and port infrastructure. Work is required to identify pots of EU funding which could be of benefit to Caithness.

AIR: It was confirmed that the summer timetable remains the same except for a minor adjustment where the Loganair flight from Edinburgh arrives a few minutes earlier at 12.20. There has been some recent disruption from cross winds, not previously experienced to this degree, recently and flights diverted to Inverness or Edinburgh. It was pointed out that there is no contingency plan when flights are redirected and passengers' comfort is not taken into account. For example, in an instance which may be typical, passengers from a diverted flight were landed in Inverness and on arrival were not offered alternative travel, food or drinks. This scenario could adversely affect the perception of Caithness at a time when it is imperative to be able to attract inward investment, tourism and a positive image of the county. Angela will raise lack of contingency planning at the next Wick Airport Consultative Committee (WACC) meeting. Improvements to the cross runway would cost £1.5M and a further 1,200 metres of ground would be required. **(ACTION: AD)**

The ILS feasibility study (written report with costings) is expected imminently and a meeting of WACC will be convened to discuss that.

Despite a few problems passenger numbers are still increasing on scheduled services although it is estimated that an increase of 20 – 30% will be required to make a strong case for improved infrastructure at the airport. The National Nuclear Archive due to be based at Wick might help figures to grow.

8 AOCB

Thanks were tendered to UKAEA for funding the MVA study and to Donna Stewart and Ron Peddie in particular for their roles in its design and successful delivery.

Highland Local Transport Strategy: Alex MacManus will find out from David Sutherland when the consultation for this will begin and report back to CTF **(ACTION: DM)**.

9 DONM

16 May at the DERC/T3UK building, Janetstown, Thurso at 10.30am