



CAITHNESS TRANSPORT FORUM

**MINUTES OF MEETING HELD IN
MOWAT ROOM, ASSEMBLY ROOMS,
WICK**

ON 22 AUGUST 2008

Present: John Green, (Chair) Association of Caithness Community Councils
Angela Donaldson, HIAL
George Bruce OBE, Caithness Partnership
Coreen Campbell, Caithness Community Transport
Mike Lunan, Friends of the Far North Line
Cllr Robert Coghill
Colin Johnston, Thurso Community Council
Cllr Donnie Mackay
Billy Manson, Halkirk Community Council
Louise Smith, HITRANS
Anna MacConnell, Caithness Partnership
Charlie Mullen, Stagecoach
William Mainus, Stagecoach

1. APOLOGIES

Ian Moncrief, Campbell Stuart, Ron Peddie and Sandy Mackie.

The Chairman welcomed Colin Johnston to his first meeting.

2. MINUTES

A minute of the joint meeting with Orkney on 31 May 2008 was distributed. A minute of the previous CTF meeting was approved subject to a change in item 8, to read – “DORLAG is currently trying to make a business case for the Dornoch rail link. All options are being considered including a light railway could be installed on the new route, retaining the Lairg loop for heavier freight traffic”.

3. MATTERS ARISING NOT ON THE AGENDA

John Green reported that improvements are being carried out at Gills Bay while heavy lifting gear is on-site improving the pier for the new ferry. The committee is attempting to become incorporated as a company limited by guarantee. It is

understood that Andrew Banks has been asked to remove his linkspan from Wick harbour.

4. BUS SERVICES IN CAITHNESS

The Chairman welcomed Charlie Mullen, Managing Director of Stagecoach and William Mainus, Commercial Manager. Anna explained that Stagecoach and Caithness Partnership had worked together to produce a postcard survey of which 8,000 had subsequently been distributed across the county to a variety of locations, organisations and on the buses. To date 325 postcards had been returned and the comments collated into a report which was circulated to the meeting.

Charlie Mullen reminded members that Stagecoach had taken over Rapson's business on 16 May and had demonstrated commitment to improve the service. Mr Mullen felt that it was early in the partnership in Caithness but he hoped that a good relationship can be developed. He was getting to know the business in the area, some initial investment has already been made and he felt that one of the biggest assets Stagecoach has in the area is the local staff.

Stagecoach will continue to improve the vehicle profile but can't set a date for this until the Office of Fair Trading has cleared the acquisition. Stagecoach staff will continue to attend CTF meetings and take on board stakeholder's views. William Mainus felt that the quick progress that the company had had in Fort William demonstrated their commitment to improving services in the Highlands and Caithness is the company's next priority. They have revised the 25x service with a proposed 2 hourly service between Caithness and Inverness having been approved by the office of fair trading. The 3 new vehicles that are in use in Caithness were fitted with lifts and toilet space was sacrificed for that. The new timetable will accommodate a toilet stop, probably in Dornoch. Stagecoach is currently trying to obtain 15 new or nearly new buses for use in Caithness, including low floor development.

Cllr Donnie Mackay raised the issue of bus shelters with a view that they are substandard. David Summers reported that funding for bus shelters has been difficult this year as the capital fund previously held by HITRANS is no longer available. TEC Services has set aside £50K this year for bus shelters.

Castlegreen Road bus shelter was felt to be particularly bad and should be at the top of the list for improvement.

The report of the postcard survey carried out by Caithness Partnership and Stagecoach demonstrated that the biggest issue for the public is timetabling – people wanting to travel to and from work, for example, but unable to do so as the timetables are unsuitable. Access is also a big issue with many respondents highlighting the need for low floor vehicles and repositioning of bus stops.

It was raised that the new timetable to Inverness with a more frequent service has been extended by 15-20 minutes but on balance it was felt that this was an improvement. The earlier bus north and later bus south will be very helpful.

Mr Mullen said he would be happy to co-sign lobbying letters in relation to the quality of road surfacing. He would also be happy to give a comment for any joint press statement issued by Caithness Partnership about the survey.

A draft timetable would be provided to the Forum before it is published.

Cllr Mackay asked whether a suggested new bus station in Thurso would feature in Stagecoach's plans and Mr Mullen replied that it would be a medium term aim. Developing the priorities highlighted in the questionnaire would need to be dealt with first.

Mr Mullen gave assurances that the points raised by the Forum and through the survey would be considered by Stagecoach and changes made where possible. Members welcomed this positive approach and suggested a press statement be issued.

5 UPDATES

Road: Cllr Coghill raised the issue of the spread of ragwort along the road verges. Ragwort is a notifiable plant and there are legal implications for the landowner if it is allowed to proliferate on his land. Ragwort is creeping onto many of the local farms from the road verges and causing a problem for farmers. It was suggested that this issue be raised with a representative of Transerve and that a representative be invited to the next meeting of the Forum to discuss this as well as some issues about traffic lights. If a special meeting is required then that could be arranged and a list of issues must be put in front of Transerve before the next meeting.

Rail: Mike Lunan reported that the last of the refurbished 158's are being put into service. An enquiry to be made to CTF to Network Rail regarding progress on the issue of disposal of sewerage from trains to the track. Mark Norton recorded his thanks to everyone who had effected these improvements to the 158's and felt that there is a vast improvement in service.

Mr Norton (DORLAG) had met with Wick Harbour Authority to seek their support for the aims of DORLAG. He had also held positive meetings with Helmsdale and Brora Community Councils. The UKAEA had submitted a response to the National Planning Framework which mentioned a Dornoch Rail Link and DORLAG is extremely appreciative of UKAEA support.

Billy Manson was pleased to see DORLAG and FFNL representatives finding common ground and hoped that the two groups would continue to interact positively with each other.

Mr Norton reported that DORLAG is lobbying for a government backed examination of the socio-economic impacts of the proposed Dornoch Rail Link.

George Bruce OBE reported that HITRANS internal discussions on rail had been the subject of a freedom of information request.

£50M worth of improvements to the Perth>Inverness line have been suggested by HITRANS but their recommendation may not be accepted. Nothing is likely to happen regarding improvements to signaling until the RATB system is completely tested. CTF to write to Network Rail seeking an update.

Sea: Early developmental activity at Gills had been discussed under matters arising.

Air: Angela Donaldson reported that there had been a growth in traffic at Wick Airport during July. Helicopter traffic on oil related work had brought welcome extra business.

Angela was working with Ron Peddie, Andy Bruce and a team from HIE to identify where a suite of improvements could be identified by HIE as a transformational project and there is an understanding that improvements should not be isolated to operational issues.

HIAL is approaching the point where the cross runway has to be decommissioned. It is unlikely that capital will become available to improve it in the future. It is only suitable for use by light aircraft of less than 2,700 kilos and microlights.

John Banister had recently requested an update on ADS use and discovered that although there are 12,000 members, only 500 had used the scheme. A flyer/leaflet had been circulated in the county reminding people of the benefits to be had from the ADS.

Haar had been less of a problem to the airport this summer than in previous years.

John Green thanked Miss Donaldson for a very positive report.

8. A.O.C.B.

Funding for the Community Transport Scheme in Caithness would be decided shortly after meeting of TEC Services in late October.

9. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The next meeting date to be arranged to suit availability of a Scotland Transerv representative, towards the end of October.