



# Minutes of the Caithness Transport Forum

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**Date:** 05/12/2014

**Time:** 11:30am

**Location:** Naver Business Centre, Thurso

## Present

Trudy Morris	Caithness Chamber of Commerce (Chair)
David Swanson	Caithness Chamber of Commerce (Minute Secretary)
Billy Manson	Association of Caithness Community Councils
Peter Body	Caithness Chamber of Commerce
John Green	Caithness Partnership
David Flear	Dounreay Stakeholder Group
Alex Macmanus	Highland Council
Deirdre Mackay	Highland Council
Gillian Coghill	Highland Council
Iain Moncrieff	Highland Council
Roger Saxon	Highland Council
Willie Mackay	Highland Council
Mark Norton	North Rail Line Action Group
Anna MacConnell	Nuclear Decommissioning Authority
Sandy Mackie	Scrabster Harbour Trust
Steve Walker	Stagecoach
Bob Earnshaw	Thurso Community Council

## 1. Welcome and apologies

- 1.1 The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting and thanked all present for attending.
- 1.2 Apologies were received from:

Fiona Levack	Caithness Chamber of Commerce
Eann Sinclair	Caithness & North Sutherland Regeneration Partnership
Coreen Campbell	Caithness Rural Transport
John Yellowlees	First ScotRail
David Sutherland	Highland Council
James Foubister	Orkney Islands Council
Kris Bevan	Serco NorthLink Ferries
Gordon Doull	Wick Harbour Authority
Malcolm Bremner	Wick Harbour Authority

## 2. Minutes of last CTF meeting 09.09.2014

2.1 David Flear and Roger Saxon noted that they had not been included in the list of attendees at the previous meeting

2.2 Bob Earnshaw noted that he was credited as representing the Association of Caithness Community Councils, but that he was in fact representing Thurso Community Council.

2.3 On condition of these alterations being made, the minutes of the last meeting were then unanimously approved.

## 3. Review of actions from last meeting

### **CTF(2014)M003/A001 – Chamber to get update from DRS on Georgemas railhead. Ongoing**

Trudy Morris noted that she had received an email from DRS regarding a stakeholder event they wished to hold in Inverness. Trudy noted that she and Anna MacConnell would have a further conversation with DRS to get more clarity on the purpose of the event.

David Flear noted that at a recent DSG Site Restoration Subgroup meeting it had been asked whether Dounreay would consider using DRS to bring materials up, considering the carbon footprint of road transport. Bob Earnshaw reported that significant shipments were expected to be delivered to Dounreay in the near future and noted his disappointment at Dounreay not using DRS to deliver this.

There was some discussion of this matter. Anna MacConnell noted that DRS have to operate as a commercial company and cannot be subsidised to the disadvantage of other commercial operators. David Flear reiterated the environmental advantages of rail and Bob Earnshaw noted the socio-economic factors involved.

Mark Norton noted that at a previous session with DRS, it was stated that substantial infrastructural improvements are needed to the line to make commercial freight viable.

Trudy Morris noted that a strong business case is necessary to secure investment in the line.

There was some discussion of other ways the freight could be carried – by sea or air – but David Flear noted that road was the preferred option.

Peter Body enquired as to whether any other freight was brought in using the Georgemas railhead – it was noted that Subsea 7 use the railhead regularly and that Tesco used to.

Anna MacConnell said she felt that this issue could benefit from a more focused working party – Trudy agreed but felt that more info was needed from DRS before this could happen.

Roger Saxon raised the Council's Carbon CLEVER initiative – Trudy reiterated that a strong business case is the key factor.

David Flear suggested that, as the railhead was intended as a legacy for the area and there is a need to maximise its use, there may be a need to look at talking to freight operators other than DRS. Mark Norton noted that while he would support the idea of approaching alternative operators, DRS spent a significant amount developing the railhead and that this may factor in to the business case for other operators using the facility. Anna noted that DRS' main selling point is the quality of their service rather than the price.

Peter Body noted that the Forum should enquire as to which potential clients DRS has been talking to.

It was agreed that Anna MacConnell and Trudy Morris would talk to Kyle Palmer at DRS and report back to the Forum at the next meeting.

**CTF(2014)M003/A002** – *Eann Sinclair to talk to Stuart Black regarding flood defence plans for Highlands. Complete.*

It was noted that Eann now has the appropriate Council contact to discuss this and is progressing this action.

Deirdre Mackay asked what information in particular the Forum was interested in – Trudy noted that this action came as a result of the flooding at Thurso riverside. Given that this was likely to reoccur, the Forum is keen to find out what the flood defence plans are.

Deirdre said she could speak to the Highland Council's planning department and to Eann and get an update on this.

**CTF(2014)M004/A001** – *Deirdre Mackay to get an update on flood defence planning for the Highlands*

Iain Moncrieff said he understood that all flooding incidents in the Highlands have been listed and graded in terms of risk to property. Trudy enquired as to when this work would be complete – Iain said he thought the report would be available in 2015 and the work would start in 2016/17.

Roger Saxon noted that Thurso is not the highest priority, as the cost of flooding and risks are below that of other areas.

Deirdre noted that there is a wider-scale discussion taking place with regards to this issue.

David Flear noted that the flood prevention plan for Wick was drawn up years ago. Iain noted that a section of these defences are being built now at Bridgend.

**CTF(2014)M003/A003** – *David Swanson to circulate correspondence between CTF and Keith Brown.*  
**Complete**

Correspondence was made available to attendees – Trudy noted that this was with regards to the dry-docking of the MV Hamnavoe in 2016.

Trudy noted that there may be other vessels available in the marketplace at that point but that the Forum should continue to check with NorthLink Ferries regarding their plans.

**CTF(2014)M003/A004** – *Eann Sinclair to contact Highland Council TECS regarding non-engagement.*  
**Complete**

This has been done and a representative was present at the meeting. Iain Moncrieff gave his apologies for previous non-attendance. Deirdre noted that she had taken this up with Campbell Stewart and that his staff were very busy.

**CTF(2014)M003/A005** – *Chamber to feed back to BEAR regarding engagement with CTF and to get update on winter works programme.* **Ongoing**

David Swanson noted he had a copy of the Winter Service Plan 2014-15 for the area and that it could be emailed to anyone who would like a copy.

It was agreed that this action would be kept ongoing.

**CTF(2014)M003/A006** – *David Swanson to clarify ownership of land at Janetstown with David Flear.*  
**Complete**

David Swanson clarified this with David Flear – this point was raised last year and Stagecoach lease the land

**CTF(2014)M003/A007** – *Christine Dodd to contact Neil Young with regards to issues with bus timetables and replacement bus shelter on Dounreay road.* **Complete**

David Swanson gave an update from Neil - he confirmed on 11<sup>th</sup> September that he had arranged for the timetables to be sent to Stan Towers and that the shelter at Upper Burnside was due to be replaced imminently. Bob Earnshaw confirmed that the shelter had been replaced.

**CTF(2014)M003/A008** – *David Swanson to forward contact details for Willie Watt to Stan Towers*  
**Complete**

David confirmed that this had been actioned.

**CTF(2014)M003/A009** – *Stan Towers to look at aligning bus times with those of trains and ferries.*  
**Complete**

Stan stated in an email to David Swanson that there is a review of services in Caithness due in early 2015 – timetables for buses from Scrabster to Thurso will be looked at then.

Steve Walker noted that Stagecoach do align the X99 with ferry timetables and that they have had discussions with ScotRail about transferring passengers, but that their main focus was on getting passengers to Inverness

**CTF(2014)M003/A010 – Trudy Morris to put Kris Bevan in touch with Venture North. Complete**

Trudy confirmed that this had been actioned.

**CTF(2014)M003/A011 – David Swanson to feed back to ScotRail regarding cancellations / delays on Far North Line. Complete**

This was actioned and copies of correspondence were made available to attendees.

**CTF(2014)M003/A012 – Roger Saxon to provide David Swanson with update on Highland Council capital programme. Complete**

Roger provided this information to David – David confirmed he would circulate this to the Forum.

**CTF(2014)M004/A002 – David Swanson to circulate information on Highland Council capital programme**

John Green enquired as to progress on works from Keiss to North Keiss – Iain Moncrieff noted that he had a meeting on Monday to discuss this.

Anna MacConnell enquired as to the cost for timber extraction. Iain noted that this was to seed an application to the Strategic Timber Transport Fund.

There was some discussion of the damage done to roads by timber transport vehicles, with particular reference to the Westerdale road – Iain noted that there is a move towards tractor and drag vehicles which should result in less damage to the roads. With regards to Westerdale, he noted that a passing place had been part-funded – he further noted that tarring the road is not an option due to cost.

It was queried why timber transport was not carried out by rail – Iain noted that due to the low value of timber, this had proven not to be economically viable. David Flear further noted that some discussions had previously been held about using Altnabreac station.

There was some discussion of issues with timber lorries on single-track roads and the impact on other drivers – it was agreed that the Highland Council would take an action to talk to the haulage companies about this.

**CTF(2014)M004/A003 – Iain Moncrieff to talk to haulage companies about issues with timber lorries**

## 4. Berriedale Braes

Trudy Morris delivered a brief update on the Berriedale Braes. She noted that an exhibition had recently been held at Berriedale and that the key issue now is funding for the work. She stressed the importance of getting this in the Scottish Government's budget and noted that the Chamber is seeking a meeting with the new Transport Minister to discuss this. She asked if the councillors present could also stress the importance of this.

**CTF(2014)M004/A004** – *Chamber to seek meeting with new Transport Minister*

It was noted that the draft road orders have now been published and are now out to consultation.

There was some discussion of the potential cost of the work. Trudy noted that Transport Scotland have not yet discussed this. Roger Saxon noted that it will be a design and build contract, which should reduce the risk of overspend.

## 5. Transport Updates

### 5.1 Roads – Highland Council

Iain Moncrieff delivered an update on behalf of the Highland Council. Of note:

- What was the TECS department has been renamed as Community Services and is in the process of being reorganised – Caithness and Sutherland has now been split into three areas, each with an assistant area manager. These managers will run their own areas and collaborate on larger issues as required.
- Salt stocks are sufficient for expected winter maintenance needs
- Work is in progress on traffic orders for the changes proposed in the Wick "Safer Routes to Schools" document and on disabled bays for Thurso.
- Over the summer, a Jetpatcher was trialled for fixing potholes and was found to be very efficient. Information is currently being collated on effectiveness of repairs on the selected sites with regards to potentially purchasing a machine.

Bob Earnshaw enquired as to the progress of work on Shore Street – Iain noted that this has been deferred due to limited work hours.

Roger Saxon noted that Thurso is unique in Scotland in having a traffic order allowing unloading anywhere, including taxi ranks, and enquired if there were any plans to look at this. Iain noted that if the business community would like loading restrictions he is happy to look at this.

### 5.2 Roads – BEAR Scotland

No representative from BEAR Scotland was in attendance and no update was provided.

### 5.3 Buses – Stagecoach

Steve Walker delivered an update on behalf of Stagecoach. He noted that Highland Council are looking to make significant savings to their transport budget, which could have a major impact on local bus services across the Highlands.

There was some discussion of the age of the buses in Caithness and the possibility of upgrading the fleet. Steve noted that new buses will always go where the best commercial returns are available, but that this results in newer buses being cascaded throughout the fleet.

He further noted that Orkney Islands Council have recently changed their contracts to specify a 20-year age limit on buses (up from 15). Steve noted that nearly all services on Orkney are tendered.

Roger Saxon noted that there was an action from the Caithness Bus Users Group regarding the age profile of buses in Caithness. Steve noted that at least a third of the fleet is brand new in the last few years.

Steve noted that in 2015, Inverness will get five new electric buses and that the buses these replace will be cascaded to the rest of the fleet. He reiterated that Stagecoach lose money on the Wick and Thurso town services.

Willie Mackay noted that he is impressed with the service Stagecoach deliver – Mark Norton agreed. Steve noted that Stagecoach has also invested in the Thurso depot and is committed to running a service in the area.

### 5.4 Sea – Scrabster Harbour

Sandy Mackie provided an update from Scrabster Harbour Trust (see Appendix A). He noted that they are optimistic for 2015.

Trudy raised the issue of the Hamnavoe replacement and queried whether this was being pursued at the Northern Isles Ferry Forum. Sandy confirmed but noted there is a danger that the Northern Isles Ferry Forum becomes Orkney-centric – they intend to continue to represent Caithness.

Sandy noted that there is some concern in the fishing sector with regards to the impact of the discard ban – due to come into force in 2015 for pelagic fish and 2016 for white fish. He noted that there was little consultation with the sector on this and that it will be important to monitor the practical effects going forward.

He noted that the 2015-16 cruise season will see the return of Prince's Cruises, who last visited in 2008, to the port and that this is an indication that there is still appeal. He noted that there is potential growth in this sector.

With regards to oil and gas activity, Sandy noted that the sector is in a difficult period, with the price of oil expected to continue dropping for the next 18 months. There is hope that this may lead to business for Scrabster, which offers a cost reduction compared to Aberdeen.

The renewables outlook is mixed and Sandy cautioned that there is a need to be realistic and careful with regards to priorities for this sector.

With regards to the Crown Estate, Sandy noted that Scrabster currently pay over £50,000 per year for use of the Crown Estate assets and that the need to seek permission when letting an office based on Crown Estate land has proven burdensome.

David Flear asked whether the Council has committed to providing buses for next year's cruise season – Roger noted that the Council has not yet been asked to do this.

Bob Earnshaw asked how Scrabster intend to move forward with regards to the Crown Estate. Sandy said they would seek clarification but their position is that the harbour is in the best position to manage these assets. Deirdre Mackay noted that she has an interest in the management of Crown Estate assets being extended to all local authorities and that it is important to push for this.

There was some discussion of the perception of the poor quality of the A9 and the need to look at upgrades to the road other than at Berriedale.

## **5.5 Sea – Wick Harbour / Serco NorthLink**

A written update was received from Wick Harbour Authority – see Appendix B.

Due to lack of time, Trudy asked that any comments on Wick Harbour or Serco NorthLink be fed back to David Swanson following the meeting.

## **5.7 Air – Highlands and Islands Airports Ltd**

William Sutherland delivered an update from Highlands and Islands Airports Ltd / Wick John O'Groats Airport. Of note:

- Their most recent contract with Chevron has now come to an end
- The falling price of oil is an issue with regards to oil and gas work but they are still chasing contracts. Investment has been made in the airport, with a new hangar built.
- A delegation visited from Aberdeen – ongoing discussions have come out of this. The key point is promoting the cost reductions available.
- Work on the apron will take place next year
- Ongoing issues with the agricultural building adjacent to the airport are expected to be addressed shortly
- Numbers from both airlines remain steady – overall passenger numbers at the airport have dropped due to the loss of the Chevron contract
- The airport has now taken delivery of a new fire appliance

Willie Mackay enquired as to whether fog is still a problem – William noted that it is always an issue but that the technology to deal with it is about to be improved, with the installation of a new system.



David Flear asked if this was the same system as used in Orkney. William noted that Orkney uses an ILS system, Wick will use GNS – this is as effective as ILS and fits in with the Safe Skies in Europe requirements.

David asked whether the issue with the size of aircraft able to be used from Wick has been resolved – William confirmed that it has, as the new fire appliances will be able to cover larger aircraft.

## 5.8 Rail – First ScotRail

No representative from ScotRail was present – a written update was provided (see Appendix C)

Trudy noted that there have been issues with the timetable changing and expressed her disappointment that there was no local consultation on this. It was noted that Norlag will be hosting a meeting with Railfuture Scotland, attended by a number of local organisations as well as First ScotRail and HITRANS, at which this will be discussed. He expressed his disappointment that timetables have been lengthened.

Trudy noted that there was a further issue with the changes to calling patterns at some rural stops such as Altnabreac.

There was some further discussion on this matter and Trudy highlighted the importance of talking to the new operators, Abellio, to ensure engagement with the Forum.

Mark noted that there has been a reduction in passenger numbers at north stations and that journey time reduction is the most important issue for local rail users. Trudy noted that the Chamber would be attending Norlag's meeting and has a separate meeting set up with Iain Wilson and John Kerr of ScotRail to discuss recent issues.

Deirdre Mackay raised the issue of the difficulty of advance booking of tickets, which often requires rail users to pay for delivery.

Trudy noted that the Chamber would find the appropriate contact for Abellio and get in touch. Mark Norton noted that he had details and agreed to forward these to David Swanson.

**CTF(2014)M004/A005** – *Mark Norton to forward Abellio contact details to David Swanson*

Roger queried whether the stations removed from the 8:02 service will become request stops – Trudy clarified that they will not be called at.

## 6. Any Other Business

William Sutherland noted that HIAL and NHV met with SSE regarding the Beatrice offshore wind farm and that NHV will bid for the contract to support this.

There being no other business, the meeting was closed.

## 7. Date of Next Meeting

The next meeting will be held on 5<sup>th</sup> March 2015 in Wick.

## 8. Actions ongoing from previous meetings

**CTF(2014)M003/A001** – Chamber to get update from DRS on Georgemas railhead. **Ongoing**

**CTF(2014)M003/A005** – Chamber to feed back to BEAR regarding engagement with CTF and to get update on winter works programme. **Ongoing**

## 9. Actions arising from this meeting

**CTF(2014)M004/A001** – Deirdre Mackay to get an update on flood defence planning for the Highlands

**CTF(2014)M004/A002** – David Swanson to circulate information on Highland Council capital programme

**CTF(2014)M004/A003** – Iain Moncrieff to talk to haulage companies about issues with timber lorries

**CTF(2014)M004/A004** – Chamber to seek meeting with new Transport Minister

**CTF(2014)M004/A005** – Mark Norton to forward Abellio contact details to David Swanson

# Appendix A – Scrabster Harbour Report

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Caithness Transport Forum 5<sup>TH</sup> December 2014

## Scrabster Harbour Trust Update

- 1. Ferry** – Overall ferry activity levels for 2014 are higher than last year which is to be expected as the crankshaft repair in April / May 2013 adversely affected traffic numbers.

Passenger and vehicle activity over the summer period, June to August 2014, was 4% higher than the corresponding period in 2013.

The Trust, following dialogue with Serco Northlink, has submitted a funding bid to the Ferries Accessibility Fund administered by Scottish Government.

There was a further meeting of the Northern Isles Ferry Forum in September, however, due to technical difficulties the Trust was not able to participate by tele-conference.

- 2. Fishing** – The increase in fishing activity previously reported has continued. Box landings since April 2014, amounted to 202,654 boxes, an increase of 32% on the corresponding period in 2013. The increase in activity is attributable to improved infrastructure (particularly refrigeration of the fish market), competitive fuel and competitive harbour dues.

- 3. Cruise** – The 2014 cruise season ended with the visit of the Hebridean Princess on 31 August 2014. The final figures were eight vessels with a gross registered tonnage of 80,988 bringing 2,562 passengers to the county.

Six vessels are booked for 2015 with a potential gross tonnage of 130,049 GRT and 3,556 passengers. A further four vessels are already booked for 2016.

- 4. Other Trade** – As at the end of November, the port had received 86 oil and gas arrivals, almost a 50% increase on last year's figures.

General cargo trade continues to be strong across a range of commodities including timber, rock salt, salmon smolts and nuclear. A total of 37,460 tonnes of timber have been shipped through Scrabster this year.

A new weekly containerised fish cargo service, operated by Eimskip between Faroes and Scrabster began at the beginning of September. The service had previously operated to Aberdeen. The cargo volumes carried by Eimskip have been very encouraging, with on average 400 tonnes of primarily iced salmon being carried on each visit. Most of the product is subsequently air freighted to Asia and the USA. Some back cargo is being exported to the Faroes included fresh fish, confectionery, and oil equipment.

The previous twice weekly fish cargo service, operated by Fresh Link, has now ceased and the company has entered bankruptcy proceedings.

- 5. Development** – The Scrabster Amenities Upgrade project, supported by Highland FLAG Axis 4 funding, is now complete and operational.

The Fisherman’s Mission building is now in the Trust’s control.

A new workboat was delivered to the Trust in October. The acquisition of the new vessel was supported by financial assistance from the NDA. The vessel, Highlanders, was named and dedicated at a ceremony on 28<sup>th</sup> November 2014.

In terms of major projects, the Trust continue to progress three projects:

- Development of the Enterprise area
- Phase II – Redevelopment of the Ola Pier
- Possible reclamation along Scrabster Beach

Availability of finance and commercial interest will determine the priority of the projects and the timescales over which they can be delivered.

- 6. Other** – The Smith Commission published its recommendations on further devolution powers last week. As regards the Crown Estate, responsibility for the Crown Estate’s assets in Scotland will be transferred to the Scottish Parliament. Subsequently, responsibility for the management of the Crown Estate assets, including the seabed, mineral and fishing rights, will be further devolved to local authority areas such as Orkney and Shetland or “other areas who seek such responsibility”. It is not clear whether this would include Trust ports such as Scrabster.

Scrabster Harbour Trust’s long standing position is that the seabed current leased from the Crown Estate should be transferred to the ownership and management of the Port.

The county’s transport infrastructure (road, rail and air) are promoted, by the Trust and others, as a significant mainland advantage over the island communities. A recent Scottish Enterprise / HIE commissioned draft report on Oil & Gas Port Capacity, has highlighted a view that the “road to Scrabster is of very poor quality north of Dornoch”. The Berriedale upgrade will send a signal of tangible improvement, but there is a strong perception, rooted in North East Scotland, that needs to be recognised and addressed.

**1<sup>ST</sup> December 2014**

# Appendix B – Wick Harbour Report

## WICK HARBOUR REPORT FOR CTF, DECEMBER 2014

**Fishing:** Activity continues as normal, mostly shellfish, with all landings consigned south by road.

**Cargoes:** Imported cargoes of coal, lime, road salt, towheads, steel pipe, and fertiliser, are expected to continue as normal.

Export of large tonnages of timber from site clearances for local windfarms at Burn of Whilk and Stroupster is continuing on a weekly basis, and is likely to last for several months. The cargoes are destined for Ghent in Belgium or Wismar in Germany, dependent on the quality of the timber.

**Onshore Windfarms:** Wind turbine imports for Burn of Whilk Windfarm are expected later this month.

**Offshore Windfarms:** The two major offshore windfarms currently planned in the Moray Firth near Wick, (BOWL and MORL), are due to make their 'Final Investment Decisions' in December '15/January '16. Discussions are ongoing with the Developers on the required port infrastructure needed to provide an O&M base for at least the next twenty five years.

Several vessels are now involved in work on the subsea HVDC connector from Wick to the Moray coast, and the recently installed MORL Met Mast, all making regular visits to the Harbour.

**Oil Related:** Recent activity at Subsea7 is reflected in increased imports of steel pipe and towheads, and shipping movements. Confirmed contracts through 2015/16 should continue this activity.

**Marina :** Again, fully booked by local vessels, with a waiting list for permanent berths. The visitor total to the end of September was 314, our best ever year, and vessels are now staying for several nights, increasing revenue for WHA and local businesses.

### **Visiting Yacht Nationalities 2014**

UK	<b>209 no.</b>	Belgium	<b>1</b>
Norway	<b>17</b>	USA	<b>4</b>
Germany	<b>11</b>	Poland	<b>3</b>
Netherlands	<b>35</b>	Canada	<b>1</b>
Sweden	<b>13</b>	Switzerland	<b>2</b>
Denmark	<b>5</b>	Finland	<b>2</b>
France	<b>9</b>	Austria	<b>1</b>
Ireland	<b>1</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>314</b>

**Infrastructure:** Our Engineers have awarded a Dredging Contract for the River Basin and approaches, but the start is likely to be postponed till the Spring for weather reasons.

**Future Plans:** The business case for potential breakwater options, deep water berths and laydown areas, to expand the Harbour into Wick Bay, is currently being examined by our Business Consultants. This would be a major investment, and would cater for renewables construction, larger cargo vessels, oil and gas servicing, and offshore decommissioning. Renewables O&M can be done from our current facilities, but this would open up opportunities for larger construction and service vessels.

Gordon Doull, Vice Chairman, WHA.

December 2014

## Appendix C – ScotRail Report

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You are aware of the timetable changes to improve performance (there is no reduction in service at any Caithness station), the position regarding wi-fi on trains and at Wick Station and the franchise awards to Abellio and Serco. We know about the meeting on 10 December called by the North Line Action Group.