



Minutes of the Caithness Transport Forum

Date: 11/03/2021

Time: 10:00

Location: Virtual Meeting – held over Microsoft Teams

Present

Trudy Morris	Caithness Chamber of Commerce (chair)
David Swanson	Caithness Chamber of Commerce (minutes)
June Love	Dounreay Site Restoration Ltd
Mike Lunan	Friends of the Far North Line
Bill Mowat	Gills Harbour
Adam Manson	Highland Council
Alex Macmanus	Highland Council
Cllr Struan Mackie	Highland Council
Cllr Willie Mackay	Highland Council
Don Henderson	Highland Council
Dougie Cook	Highlands & Islands Airports Ltd
Julie McGee	Highlands & Islands Enterprise
Frank Roach	HITRANS
Derek Glasgow	ScotRail
Sandy Mackie	Scrabster Harbour
Kris Bevan	Serco NorthLink Ferries
John Gunn	Stagecoach
Davie Alexander	Thurso & Wick Trades Union Council

Alan McCabe	Transport Scotland Ferries
David Caulfield	Transport Scotland Ferries
Paul Flynn	Transport Scotland Ferries
Marco Bardelli	Transport Scotland Roads

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:

Cllr Matthew Reiss	Highland Council
Kathryn Scollie	Pentland Ferries
David Beaton	Stagecoach

2. Minutes of last CTF meeting 12.11.2020

2.1 Alex Macmanus noted that he was included in both the attendees and apologies list for the last meeting – Trudy Morris confirmed this would be corrected.

2.2 Subject to that change being made, the minutes were approved as an accurate record of the last meeting

3. Review of actions from last meeting

CTF(2020)M003/A001 – Chamber to follow up with ScotRail regarding timescales for station parking work **COMPLETE**

Derek Glasgow confirmed he would update on this under the relevant agenda item.

CTF(2020)M003/A002 – Chamber to follow up with ScotRail Alliance regarding ferry connectivity and Far North Line infrastructure plans **COMPLETE**

Derek Glasgow confirmed he would update on this under the relevant agenda item.

CTF(2020)M003/A003 – Peter Faccenda and Frank Roach to liaise on discussion of future rail opportunities **ONGOING**

Frank Roach noted that he and Peter had attended an event the previous day relating to this and had some items to follow up, but that there was nothing further to add at this time.

CTF(2020)M003/A004 – William Mainus to provide details of removed services to Allan Tait **COMPLETE**

This was done and no further action is required at this time.

CTF(2020)M003/A005 – Alex Macmanus to report back on Wick/Thurso proposals under Spaces for People **COMPLETE**

Trudy Morris noted that Adam Manson would provide an update on this under the relevant agenda item.

4. Matters Arising

4.1 Trudy Morris noted that the Chamber had submitted an application to Dounreay Site Restoration Ltd for a further three years' funding for the Forum and that DSRL had awarded £10,000 per year for the next three years. She noted that this enables forward planning for the Forum and its activities and that it is good to know the Forum will be able to continue to meet and work to improve transport connectivity in the region.

4.2 Trudy noted that an application had also been made to the Highland Council and that Councillors had intimated they would be happy to provide £1,000 for the coming year. Alex Macmanus noted that this proposal was going before Councillors for discussion on Monday.

4.3 Trudy updated attendees on the Forum's priorities going forward and noted that the Forum would continue to meet three times per year. With regards to priorities, she noted the following:

- The Forum will continue to work with all transport providers and stakeholders with a view to improving connectivity to, from and within the county.
- The key issues over the coming year are what transport will look like post-COVID, how to get consumer confidence back as travel opens up again, and what this will mean for transport services in the area.

4.4 Trudy noted the importance of all transport stakeholders being involved in discussions to make sure that the area still has the services it needs going forward.

5. Transport Updates

5.1 Scrabster Harbour

5.1.1 A written update was provided (**Appendix A**). Sandy Mackie covered some of the key points in the report in a verbal update to the Forum.

5.1.2 Sandy noted that the overall picture has not changed much since November's meeting. Revenues remain down but the Trust understand the reasons for that and other sectors have performed very well.

5.1.3 The Trust is continuing with the St. Ola Pier redevelopment project and this is making good progress in terms of time, cost and quality. The project is now at the dredging stage and piling

works have been completed – at present, the Trust is still looking to end September 2021 for the completion of the project.

- 5.1.4 Sandy noted that since the last meeting of the Forum there has been some movement on the free ports issue, with the UK Budget identifying ten ports to be given this status. Scottish Government are taking a slightly different approach along broadly the same model as UK Government but with a greater alignment with Scottish Government priorities on fair work and net zero, and similar ports in Scotland will be called “green ports”. Sandy noted that at present the expectation is there will be two such ports in Scotland.
- 5.1.5 Sandy noted that the terminology of “green” ports may reflect oddly on those who do not achieve the status. He noted that there seem to be a lot of benefits to achieving either free or green port status and that, while he has no problem with other ports pursuing this, he does have concerns that this may disadvantage other ports and areas within Scotland.
- 5.1.6 On green ports, Sandy noted that Scottish Government consulted on these as part of a wider consultation around place-based economic development. While Scrabster is not going to be a green port, it does have a wider economic development agenda with regards to its enterprise area. Sandy noted that enterprise areas are going to be reviewed in 2022 and that there may be a case to be argued for some of the benefits proposed for free/green ports being applied to these and to areas such as Caithness.
- 5.1.7 With regards to the cruise market, Sandy noted recent speculation in the media that some cruise activity may be coming back to the Highlands this year. He noted that with regards to UK Government lockdown plans, there is potential for cruise activity to restart from 17 May but that this applies only to England at present – there is some discussion amongst administrations about a UK-wide approach.
- 5.1.8 Sandy noted that he felt it positive some activity may restart this year and noted both the hard work of the cruise industry and the success of the rollout of vaccinations. The position remains uncertain as to whether any activity will be possible, but as the effectiveness of vaccine rollout increases so does the probability of cruise activity.
- 5.1.9 With regards to ferries, Sandy noted the ongoing issues with the rollout of Road Equivalent Tariff and noted that UK Government have put out a new consultation on replacing the EU State Aid regime, but that it remains a matter of regret and disappointment that RET is not in place on the Pentland Firth route when other areas have been enjoying the benefits.
- 5.1.10 Trudy noted the positives in Sandy’s update and congratulated the Trust on the progress of the St. Ola Pier project. She queried the point around border control in Sandy’s written update and asked if he could provide further information on this.
- 5.1.11 Sandy noted that Scrabster is required to provide a facility for border control purposes – the lead body on this is the Animal and Plant Health Agency with is a part of Defra, but that there are also links to Scottish Government with regards Food Standards Scotland and also with Highland Council’s environmental health team as trained people will be needed to do checks and undertake sampling at the facility. Sandy noted that the Trust has had good dialogue with

the Highland Council team and are scheduled to meet with APHA and the Scottish Government next week.

- 5.1.12 Sandy noted that this has been a difficult process and that the Trust's initial aspiration to use the fish market was declined – they are still awaiting legislative reasoning for this decision. The port did already have a building in place from the 1990s when similar requirements for Border Inspection Posts were mooted and that this appears to meet the requirements for a Border Control Post. The major concern is with regards to timescales - this has to be in place by 1 July and it is not clear what success looks like. The regulations state that any checks undertaken should be based on risk assessments but Defra only issued guidance on these last week. Resourcing is also a concern, with just one vet within APHA in Scotland responsible for dealing with all Border Control Post applications. Sandy noted that despite the challenges, the Trust are making good progress.
- 5.1.13 Trudy noted Sandy's concerns around the issue of green ports and that the Forum can look to support any letter or application which the Trust might be writing in terms of the review of economic development areas in 2022, and that it would keep a watching brief to ensure a level playing field. She asked Sandy if he could keep the Forum updated on any developments.
- 5.1.14 Paul noted that he was meeting regularly with State Aid colleagues in Scottish Government and could provide an update on RET at this juncture. He introduced himself to Forum attendees and noted that he works in the Ferry Policy team within Transport Scotland and continues to be involved in work undertaken to reduce fares across the Pentland Firth and wider Northern Isles Ferry Services.
- 5.1.15 With regards to subsidy control, Paul noted that what were State Aid rules have now been replaced by UK Government Subsidy Control rules from 1 January and that this new set of rules is in place. At the present time, it is unclear what the timescales are for these to remain – this is an interim set of guidance. The Scottish Government's State Aid/Subsidy Control team is undertaking work along with the legal division to understand what the new UK regime will mean for subsidies, including for ferry services, under the UK-EU Trade and Cooperation Agreement and other international obligations.
- 5.1.16 Paul updated the Forum that BEIS are undertaking a consultation exercise on subsidy rules and Scottish Government colleagues are trying to input as much as possible before the pre-election period. He noted that there is a general difficulty in getting meaningful responses from BEIS to enquiries regarding subsidies.
- 5.1.17 Paul noted that it may be the case that Scottish Government ministers will have more scope to reduce fares under new rules and that Scottish Government is working to understand this. He noted that political considerations include Scottish Government's aspirations for independence and to rejoin the EU, so it may be the case that Scottish Government does not want to avail itself of new rules.
- 5.1.18 With regards to an article recently published in the Orcadian, Paul noted that this is not a case of Scottish Government versus Pentland Ferries and that both he and colleagues have engaged well with Pentland Ferries throughout the pandemic. He noted that with regards to RET and the

“Farebox” variant, both Scottish Government and Pentland Ferries were working on advice from their legal advisers. He understands that Pentland Ferries want true RET and that the Scottish Government position is that if this is possible it will be done, and that ministers have said that before.

- 5.1.19 Continuing on the Pentland Ferries matter, Paul noted that the Scottish Government had previously been told that introducing RET on the Gills Bay route would distort the market as the shorter route would have mean disproportionately lower fares. On meeting with the European Commission, it was discussed that any subsidy would distort the market to some degree but that this is not a reason to do nothing. Paul noted that this work was undertaken pre-COVID and that it is being returned to, with an internal working group including legal and subsidy control colleagues convened. Pentland Ferries are positive with regards to future engagement and the plan is to take this forward. Paul noted that he is happy to keep the Forum updated as this progresses.
- 5.1.20 Trudy thanked Paul for his updated and noted the extreme frustration within the community that no progress is being made on this issue. While it is understood that the issues around leaving the EU and changes to State Aid rules have impacted, it is still frustrating. She noted that it is the SNP, rather than Scottish Government, that is seeking independence and that with an election coming up it is not known what the Government will look like in May. She noted that this issue should be pushed ahead regardless of party politics and that the Forum would write again to Paul Wheelhouse MSP in his ministerial role on this matter.
- 5.1.21 Paul noted that he agrees that nobody knows what the political landscape will look like, but he mentioned it as it seems likely there will be another SNP government and that Scottish Government will have a decision to make in that case. He wanted to be upfront that changes to State Aid rules may not provide the “silver bullet” that is being sought on this issue. Paul noted that he met with Mr Wheelhouse in the week before last and that Mr Wheelhouse wants this issue resolved as soon as possible into the next Parliament.

CTF(2021)M001/A001 - *Forum to write to Paul Wheelhouse MSP regarding rollout of Road Equivalent Tariff*

- 5.1.22 Bill Mowat drew attendees’ attention to Kathryn Scollie’s interview in the Orcadian the preceding week.

5.2 Wick Harbour

- 5.2.1 A letter provided by Wick Harbour detailing the impacts of loss of scheduled flights from Wick John O’Groats Airport was circulated (**Appendix B**). Trudy Morris noted that the Chamber had written to the Cabinet Secretary on this matter and that things had now moved on with the announcement of funding for a Public Service Obligation (PSO) from Wick.
- 5.2.2 Trudy noted that work on the Moray East windfarm is expected to start again in spring, as is non-essential work on the Beatrice windfarm.

5.3 Gills Harbour

- 5.3.1 A written update was provided on behalf of Gills Harbour (**Appendix C**). Bill Mowat noted his support of Sandy Mackie's comments with regards to enterprise areas. With regards to RET, he noted that it has been known for months that RET was not offered to Pentland Ferries and that instead they were offered a "farebox" system and his hope that the matter can be resolved ASAP.

5.4 Pentland Ferries

- 5.4.1 No attendee was present and no written update provided.

5.5 Serco NorthLink Ferries

- 5.5.1 Kris Bevan provided an update to the Forum on behalf of Serco NorthLink Ferries. A written update was also provided by Transport Scotland Ferries (**Appendix D**).
- 5.5.2 With regards to passenger numbers on the Pentland Firth route, in 2020 these were just over 53,000 compared to 161,000 in 2019. Around 18,000 cars were carried in 2020 compared to over 45,000 in 2019. Freight lane metres were just under 50,000 compared to 60,000 in 2019. Kris noted that it is clear the COVID-19 pandemic is having a significant impact on volumes.
- 5.5.3 On operations, Kris noted that the *Hamnavoe* went into dry dock in January and was to be covered by the *Helliar* during that period, however following a well-reported incident the *Helliar* had to be taken out of service for the remainder of the week leading to a suspension of the service. On a more positive note, Kris noted that NorthLink were able to take the *Hrossey* into Scrabster Harbour and provide onward connectivity for some key stakeholders during a closure of Aberdeen Harbour. He noted that Scrabster is a part of NorthLink's resilience and continuity planning.
- 5.5.4 In terms of COVID-19, Kris noted that NorthLink continue to operate reduced passenger carrying capacity on their vessels to adhere to 1m physical distancing per Scottish Government travel and transport guidance, and that a range of risk assessments and control measures are in place to ensure passenger and staff safety. NorthLink continue to operate an amended onboard service offering and are consistently engaging with staff and trade unions with regards to updates and changes as guidance is amended.

- 5.5.5 Kris noted that NorthLink capture all information required for travel during COVID-19 including reason for travel, and that they continue to update their website with the latest Scottish Government guidance.
- 5.5.6 Looking ahead in terms of social media, the focus is to continue pushing Scottish Government messaging with regards to COVID-19 response, and to keep interest and engagement going in the hopes of welcoming passengers and tourists again in future and the “buy local” message is also being emphasised. NorthLink continue to engage with key stakeholders including VisitScotland and other DMOs.
- 5.5.7 Trudy Morris noted that there is still a question outstanding regarding group bookings and that per the Transport Scotland update this remains under review. She flagged this up as a concern for the industry, which is suffering acutely and noted it would be good to understand the thinking behind getting these bookings reinstated.
- 5.5.8 Paul Flynn noted his understanding that discussions on this matter are ongoing and that Alan McCabe had recently taken over from Paul Linhart-MacAskill. It was agreed that Paul and Alan would take this back and provide an update to the Forum on the matter.

CTF(2021)M001/A002 - *Paul Flynn and Alan McCabe to update Forum on plans for group bookings on ferry services*

- 5.5.9 Sandy Mackie noted that the Transport Scotland update made mention of constructive meetings with island representatives with regards to COVID-19 testing and island entry point testing. He queried whether there would be any consultation with ports on this matter. Paul Flynn agreed to seek an update on this matter.

CTF(2021)M001/A003 - *Paul Flynn to provide update on COVID-19 testing consultation with ports*

5.6 ScotRail Alliance

- 5.6.1 A written update was provided (**Appendix E**) Trudy Morris asked if Derek Glasgow could cover the actions on station parking, ferry connectivity and infrastructure plans before his main update.
- 5.6.2 On station parking, Derek noted that the work is being taken forward Scotland-wide, with consultancy support from Stantec, with a view to completion in early summer and that Thurso is part of this workplan. On the matter of ferry connectivity, Derek noted that he understood a colleague within ScotRail had spoken to HITRANS on this matter and that this is being worked on.
- 5.6.3 On infrastructure plans, Derek noted that there are three phases of work to be carried out on the Far North Line, and that funding has just been confirmed for the first phase. This includes request to stop – a 3D survey has been done of all stations bar Altnabreac of

where request to stop kiosks are best suited to the timetable. For linespeed, 20 areas have been selected for track alignment design and work will be starting next month on that.

- 5.6.4 Derek noted that phase 2 will be looking at token-operated points, with 11 selected areas to work on and cost plan workshops are scheduled for next week on this. Lentrans Loop has required habitat and scientific surveys to be carried out to determine where the loop should be placed, and there is a final option meeting due next week to decide this. In phase 3, all that work will be put together and a refreshed timetable created with significantly more resilience than at present.
- 5.6.5 With regards to current performance, Derek noted that there is not much to say about the last 6-7 weeks - most issues have been due to snow and a landslip although there were two safety issues, one of which was reported to Network Rail. Derek noted that patronage has dropped up to 90% as a result of COVID-19 and that the planning going into the future includes a big push on discretionary travel including tourism. He noted that it remains unclear what the future model will look like with regards to commuting.
- 5.6.6 Trudy noted recently published ScotRail plans to decarbonise the rail network and the aspiration this contains that no diesel trains will be operating by 2035 – she asked if Derek could update on how this would work with regards the Far North Line.
- 5.6.7 Derek noted that the Transport Scotland decarbonisation plan was published in July 2020 and that work is being undertaken to look at alternative traction on the Far North Line, with battery and hydrogen trains currently being explored. The current state of battery technology would give a range of about 50 miles, so would require extensive charging infrastructure. Hydrogen has more promise for longer range but the technology and supply chains are relatively immature. Transport Scotland are leading this as part of their rolling stock strategy and Derek estimated it would be mid-late 2020s before a formal alternative is selected.
- 5.6.8 Mike Lunan thanked Derek for his update and asked when the new timetable mentioned would be in operation – Derek confirmed it would be May 2022.
- 5.6.9 Trudy noted this was promising and hoped that there would be some passenger recovery by then but emphasised the need for clear messaging to give consumer confidence in returning to public transport.
- 5.6.10 Derek noted that the business model for the railway has collapsed due to COVID-19 and that there is some uncertainty as to what this model will look like going forward.

5.7 Direct Rail Services

- 5.7.1 Trudy Morris noted that a brief update had been received from Direct Rail Services that restrictions remain in place and DRS are waiting for more information from Scottish Government on what plans to lift these will look like before they can look at a date for the trial. Trudy noted that the Forum would continue to keep in touch with DRS to progress this once possible.

5.8 Highland Council Roads

- 5.8.1 No attendee was present but a written update was provided (**Appendix F**).
- 5.8.2 Trudy Morris noted that the Forum had received communications from the Caithness Roads Recovery campaign and that she felt the Forum needed a fuller update on the roads situation than had been provided. She asked Alex Macmanus when the Area Committee would be looking at the draft roads plan and whether there was any opportunity for the Forum to see a draft and make input. Alex noted the Committee would be reviewing the plan on 22 April and that he could not speak to the Forum's ability to input into any draft.
- 5.8.3 Cllr Mackie updated the Forum with an update regarding roads as of the latest Highland Council budget. He noted that this was passed on 4 March and contained a real terms improvement on investment into roads of around £23 million over four years. Cllr Mackie noted that it has been previously communicated to the Forum that much of the capital programme for roads has not taken place due to COVID-19, and that some of the issues that are now being seen with roads failure can be traced back to this.
- 5.8.4 Cllr Mackie noted that the new investment is welcome and that Councillors are regularly meeting with roads teams as this is one of the biggest issues being reported by the public. In terms of the date for the Caithness Committee, this is when the capital programme will come forward with the technical priority list from officers. Cllr Mackie noted there is a direct £100,000 increase for Caithness that is coming just for roads capital from the budget.
- 5.8.5 Trudy asked whether there would be any communication made regarding this – she noted the traction being gained by Caithness Roads Recovery and the need to communicate on these matters. Cllr Mackie noted that a monthly roads meeting was held the preceding day and that representatives of Caithness Roads Recovery were on that call. He noted that there is an information gap between what Councillors would like to have informed to the public and what people are getting, and that this is in part that people are encouraged to report issues but there isn't necessarily a process to keep people informed as to what happens with these reports. Councillors are very conscious that there are issues across the network.
- 5.8.6 Cllr Mackie drew attendees attention to the fact that there is now a structural problem across the roads network, in that it would take an estimated £200 million to bring the roads network up to an acceptable standard, but the Council cannot take more than £15-16 million of capital infrastructure spend per year. Even if the budget is increased significantly it is not addressing the deficit in the condition of roads and there is a wider issue that needs to be addressed here. Cllr Mackie drew attention to the differences between the Council network and the trunk roads network.
- 5.8.7 Trudy thanked Cllr Mackie for his update and noted that the Forum needs to lobby central government for additional funding to address structural issues with local authority roads.

CTF(2021)M001/A004 - Forum to write to Michael Matheson MSP with regards to funding for local authority roads

- 5.8.8 Davie Alexander noted his disappointment at the lack of information in the Highland Council's update.
- 5.8.9 Sandy Mackie noted the mismatch between the need in terms of roads and that while it is welcome more money is being allocated in the Council's budget, this is still planning for failure as those areas which can't be addressed will deteriorate further. He noted that this is a major area of everyday life and needs to be escalated and given a higher priority. Sandy also noted his concerns that the impacts the condition of roads might have as COVID-19 restrictions are lifted and more visitors come in to the area.
- 5.8.10 Bill Mowat noted that the capital and revenue shortage on roads in the Highlands is not a new issue. Cllr Mackie noted his agreement that the issue is systemic.
- 5.8.11 Adam Manson delivered an update on Spaces for People. He introduced the project and noted that around £400,000 has been allocated to the Caithness region. This has been proposed by Sustrans and a lot of interventions were proposed by them but the Caithness region is one of the few which has undertaken consultation with local Councillors on these, which is one reason why there has been a delay compared to other regions.
- 5.8.12 On specific interventions, Adam noted that these included 20mph restriction in Thurso and this will be in place from 22 March for 18 months. Most of Thurso is included in this, largely areas where the restriction can be brought in without introducing speed humps or other infrastructure. Some portions of the A9 are included in this where it is the main street through Thurso. A contractor is out currently to work on signage for this.
- 5.8.13 Adam noted that four pedestrian crossings in Wick and two in Thurso are being implemented through Spaces for People, with two of these crossing the trunk road. These are highlighted to allow safer travel for school children.
- 5.8.14 Adam noted that a lot of the interventions initially proposed by Sustrans were not feasible based on the amount of HGV traffic through the town centres. A new pathway is now in place on Ormlie Road, replacing what was previously unlicensed parking for cars. A tender is out for the extension of the pathway between Milton and Wick – this is a 60mph road and due to social distancing pedestrians have been stepping out into the carriageway. Many additional smaller interventions are also being undertaken such as drop curbs in Wick and reworking of the junction at Hill Avenue in Wick.
- 5.8.15 Trudy thanked Adam for his update and asked if he could keep the Forum updated on progress of these works. Adam noted that the timescales are quite short as the budget deadline is the end of March and implementation by end of May.

5.9 BEAR Scotland / Transport Scotland

- 5.9.1 An update on BEAR's programme of works for the current year and draft programme for the coming year were provided (**Appendix G**). Marco Bardelli delivered an update on behalf of Transport Scotland Roads. He noted his sympathies will Cllr Mackie with regards the challenges of local authority roads.
- 5.9.2 Marco noted that the preceding year was a significant challenge for Transport Scotland and BEAR Scotland. The impacts of COVID-19 reduced the timetable for carrying out works, and an increased budget meant more works to be delivered within that reduced timescale. In the autumn, the collapse of the Rest and Be Thankful resulted in a significant drain on budgets and resources. On top of these challenges, there was a relatively severe winter resulting in additional maintenance requirements. As a result, some schemes from the current year have had to be put forward into next year's programme.
- 5.9.3 Marco noted that the North Coast 500 signage work is starting soon, footway improvements in Brora will resume and that the parapet replacement at Reigill Bridge will hopefully be done in this year's programme – this represents around £2.4m of investment in the network in the Caithness & Sutherland area. The budget for next year will be along similar lines.
- 5.9.4 Marco noted that he welcomes any suggestions from the Forum or the community as to areas for improvement. On a personal note, Marco noted that it has been more than a year since he has been able to get out around the network. He does get weekly inspection reports and video footage but this is not ideal and he is missing the ability to go out and speak with stakeholders about their needs.
- 5.9.5 Trudy Morris queried what is happening with regards the A9 at Scrabster where there have been issues with landslides. Marco noted that emergency repairs were carried out and a geotechnical report done which highlighted some small drainage improvements but there is no easy answer – Trudy queried what was being done with these drainage options and Marco noted these would be brought forward. Marco noted this is a difficult situation due to the nature of the land ownership but that Transport Scotland recognise the lifeline nature of the road.
- CTF(2021)M001/A005** - *Marco to come back to Forum with timescale for looking at drainage options at A9 at Scrabster.*
- 5.9.6 Marco noted that Transport Scotland are working with Highland Council with regards proposals for 20mph in Thurso town centre. This can be a difficult area for Transport Scotland as 20mph is slow for trunk roads but there is an increasing flexibility on this issue so they are more open to doing this and it has been agreed for Thurso.
- 5.9.7 Cllr Mackie noted that he had reported several potholes or small failures on the trunk road network within the past few weeks and that every one of these was dealt with within three working days, and that this good response should be recorded. With regards to the 20mph restrictions in Thurso he noted the Council's ambitions that this be extended and made permanent, but noted that Thurso is in a difficult position where the trunk road and local authority networks cross over.

5.10 Stagecoach

- 5.10.1 John Gunn gave an update on behalf of Stagecoach. He noted that a previously raised issue with the 81 service to Castletown have been addressed and the service now goes straight through rather than coming out of service, turning and coming back, and will stop at Castletown Primary School.
- 5.10.2 With regards to the St. Fergus Road stop in Wick, John noted that this has not been serviced since an issue with a bus sliding down the hill in icy weather. He noted that the Council will be putting some road barriers in and replacing the road surface with a non-skid surfacing. Once this is done, Stagecoach will be happy to return to the St. Fergus Road stop.
- 5.10.3 John noted that of the fleet of 24 buses in Caithness, 13 of these had been replaced with newer buses since the previous meeting. With regards to service, since the nation went into lockdown on Boxing Day, Stagecoach have tried to maintain a service in the area and have only reduced one service, with the Saturday X99 service reduced to one per day. At present across the whole Highland network, Stagecoach are averaging about 25% of passenger numbers compared to 2019. Even prior to the lockdown announcement, the X99 patronage was often much lower than before.
- 5.10.4 John updated the Forum that a new fare revision is in place from 7 March with a simpler structure. Fares introduced include adult, child and student daily, weekly and 28 day tickets and a new flexible 5-day ticket aimed at part-time or flexible-hours workers. The price of this has been reduced to the equivalent of 4 days. These are all available on the app and on buses.
- 5.10.5 Trudy Morris queried what the timescale is for the barriers and surface to be in place for the St. Fergus Road stop. John noted that Stagecoach are waiting for Highland Council to come back to them on this.
- 5.10.6 Trudy suggested that Stagecoach do some press communications around the replacement buses as this is a good news story. John noted that there had been some press planned around the new buses previously brought in to replace the interdeck buses being used in the area.
- 5.10.7 Marco noted that he had an additional area to update on that may impact on bus services. BEAR Scotland are working on a scheme which should be implemented soon at the A9/A99 junction at Latheron. This will be relocating the bus stops to a better location and providing better connection between them for pedestrians. The whole junction will also be subject to a 40mph speed limit, as opposed to national speed limit at present.

5.13 Wick John O'Groats Airport / HIAL

- 5.13.1 A written update was provided on behalf of HIAL (**Appendix H**).
- 5.13.2 Trudy Morris gave a brief update on progress towards a Public Service Obligation (PSO) at the airport. She noted her delight that Scottish Government have announced they will put £1m per

year towards a PSO. She noted that the business case had initially proposed £3m. The Highland Council have also committed £300,000 towards the PSO putting the budget at present at £1.3m per year. Trudy noted her thanks to the Caithness Councillors for helping to secure this investment. She also noted that positive conversations have been had with UK Government and that match funding of the Scottish Government contribution is being sought, so the hope is to secure a final funding package of around £2.3m.

- 5.13.3 Trudy noted that the Highland Council are taking the lead on the PSO but that local partners are working together with them on this through a subgroup of the Caithness & North Sutherland Regeneration Partnership. A consultant has looked at the post-COVID scenarios and it is still felt that a reasonable service to both Edinburgh and Aberdeen can be secured.
- 5.13.4 Trudy updated the Forum on the next steps, noting that Highland Council would be working to draw up a specification and go out to tender on this. She noted that partners have some “red lines” as to what the specification should look like in terms of price, flights to both locations, and useful day returns. She noted that any service will be underpinned by the business community but that the solution should suit the wider community as well. The Chamber has been speaking to the bigger employers in the county to understand their travel aspirations post-COVID. The aim is to have some service in place by the end of 2021.
- 5.13.5 Dougie Cook noted that in addition to his written update he had some update on HIAL’s Air Traffic Management Strategy (ATMS). This has generated significant publicity and HIAL’s senior management have given evidence before the Petitions Committee of the Scottish Parliament. From the Wick perspective, Dougie noted that Wick will have a change of service provision rather than the centralisation of air traffic control.
- 5.13.6 Dougie also noted the Sustainable Aviation Test Environment in Kirkwall and that some of this work would be coming to Wick. Infrastructure will be put in place at Wick to enable the charging of electric-hybrid aircraft with a view to test flights taking place in mid-summer. There is also some background work going on regarding carbon neutrality and the energy usage and potential for reduction at Wick.
- 5.13.7 Trudy thanked Dougie for his updated and noted that there were significant concerns around ATMS. She noted that these would be discussed at the Wick John O’Groats Airport Consultative Committee and these discussions fed back to the Forum.
- 5.13.8 Davie Alexander noted that the work the Chamber and partners have done to secure a PSO at Wick should be commended. He noted that while the outcome is not quite what we had wanted but that something is better than nothing.

6. Press Communications

- 6.1 There was some discussion of the positive news from Stagecoach and ScotRail and Trudy suggested that they should put out their own press communications on this.
- 6.2 Davie Alexander noted the discussions around the roads network and the Forum’s action on this as well as the positive news on the PSO and suggested that press communication should be

made on these matters. It was agreed that the Chamber would put out a press release on behalf of the Forum.

CTF(2021)M001/A006 - Chamber to put out press release on roads issues and PSO on behalf of Forum

7. Any Other Business

- 7.1 Alan McCabe introduced himself as the new Transport Scotland Contracts Manager for the Northern Isles Ferry Services.
- 7.2 Marco Bardelli drew attention to the recently published STPR2 reports available online and that these cut across a lot of the issues discussed at the meeting.

8. Date of Next Meeting

- 8.1 It was noted that this would be scheduled for 7 June 2021.

9. Actions ongoing from previous meetings

CTF(2020)M003/A003 – Peter Faccenda and Frank Roach to liaise on discussion of future rail opportunities **ONGOING**

10. Actions arising from this meeting

CTF(2021)M001/A001 - Forum to write to Paul Wheelhouse MSP regarding rollout of Road Equivalent Tariff

CTF(2021)M001/A002 - Paul Flynn and Alan McCabe to update Forum on plans for group bookings on ferry services

CTF(2021)M001/A003 - Paul Flynn to provide update on COVID-19 testing consultation with ports

CTF(2021)M001/A004 - Forum to write to Michael Matheson MSP with regards to funding for local authority roads

CTF(2021)M001/A005 - Marco to come back to Forum with timescale for looking at drainage options at A9 at Scrabster.

CTF(2021)M001/A006 - Chamber to put out press release on roads issues and PSO on behalf of Forum

Appendix A – Scrabster Harbour Trust



CAITHNESS TRANSPORT FORUM 11th March 2021

SCRABSTER HARBOUR UPDATE

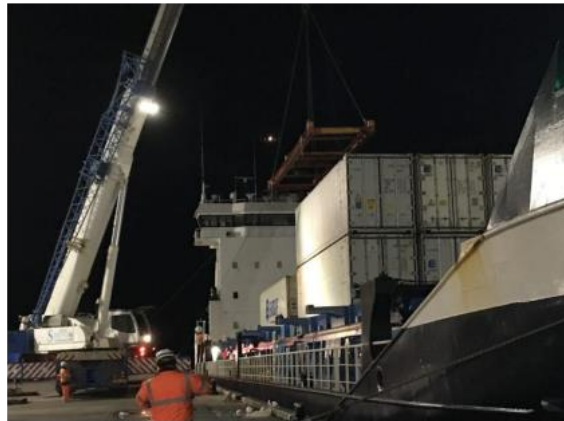
Scrabster Harbour is managed by Scrabster Harbour Trust, established in 1841 and governed by its own legislation. The Trust seeks to serve the local community and all surpluses created are reinvested into the port.

1. PORT ACTIVITY

Port activity continues to be impacted by COVID-19 and the associated public health restrictions. Total Port revenues were down 24% (£775K) for the nine-month period to 31st December 2020. Reduction in ferry traffic, no 2020 cruise season and fall in certain cargo activity contributed to the revenue decrease. However, in aggregate our non-ferry and cruise sector activity have performed close to the original pre-COVID-19 budget projections.

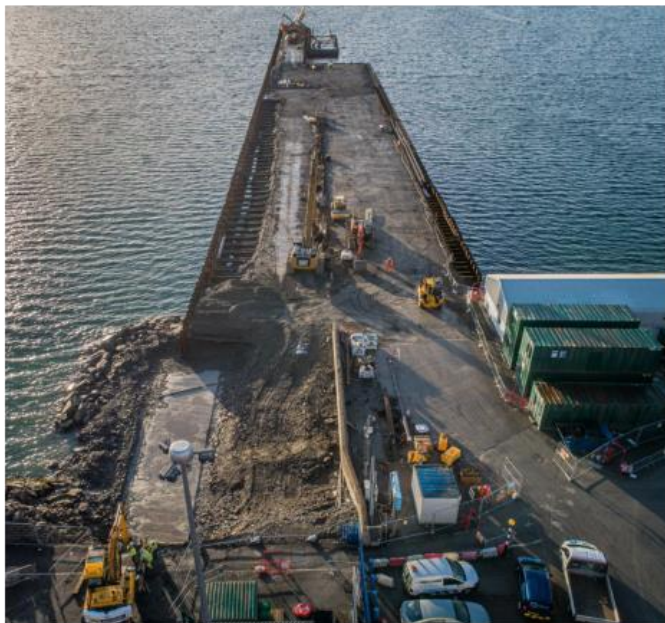
Total arrivals in the nine-month period ended 31st December 2020 amounted to 1,582 vessels, down 7.5% on last year. Total vessel tonnage amounted to 6,258,705 tonnes, down 7% on the previous year.

- Ferry passenger numbers are down 70% compared to last year.
- Fish box landings amounted to 200,837 boxes, 4% down on last year's volumes. Port revenues from fishing are 17.5% down on last year reflecting the market volatility in prices due to Covid-19.
- Oil and Gas Energy activity is also lower, 19% down on last year's arrivals and vessel tonnage figures.
- General Cargo volumes are double last year levels. The timber shipment programme for the Halsary Wind Farm has been completed.
- Faroes fish cargo volumes are up 4.5% on last year.
- Oil tanker volumes are 6% up on last year.



2. OLA PIER DEVELOPMENT

The contractor, RJ McLeod, has now been on site for over eight months. The works continue to progress well. The installation of the tube and sheet piles to create the redeveloped pier structure is now virtually complete. The two large cranes have now demobilised, as has the pile barge.



The dredging sub-contractor mobilised to site on 27th February 2021.
The programme of dredging works is forecast to continue until the end of May.

Overall, the project is currently below budget with the revised projected completion date being 30th September 2021.

3. OTHER MATTERS

- Scrabster Harbour, in common with all UK border locations, needs to prepare for the introduction of full customs controls on 1st July 2021. The Trust has applied for one of its buildings to be accredited as a Border Control Post to allow any required checks to be undertaken on imported seafood products.
- The Trust continues to work with Cruise Scotland and the Cruise companies regarding the measures required for a restart of cruise activity. There remains considerable doubt regarding what cruise activity, if any, will be permitted for the 2021 season.

5TH March 2021

Appendix B – Wick Harbour



Ms Trudy Morris
Chair
Caithness Transport Forum
Caithness Chamber of Commerce
Naver Road
Thurso
Caithness
KW14 7QA

Wick Harbour Authority
Harbour Office
The Harbour
Wick
Caithness
KW1 5HA
Tel. 01955 602030
E-mail
office@wickharbour.co.uk

Our Ref:
Your Ref:

20 January 2021

Dear Trudy,

During 2020 and in the first few weeks of 2021 Wick Harbour's facilities were being used by a major multi-national company who are involved in the construction of the Moray East windfarm. Crew Transfer and Survey vessels were operating daily from the harbour and this company had entered into an agreement to rent storage and quayside space here at the harbour. In addition, they had secured office premises in the town.

We are extremely disappointed to learn that they have decided to cease operations in Wick citing the lack of scheduled services from Wick Airport as a major factor in their decision-making process. Their contract involves crew transfers and changes on a weekly basis (we were advised initially of up to 60 crew in and out each week with these crew utilising Wick Airport). Due to the lack of scheduled flights into Wick their crew change journeys need to be now made by bus between Wick and Aberdeen and this has forced them to relocate their operations to Buckie so to be nearer to Aberdeen Airport.

This has come as a hammer blow in our efforts to promote Wick Harbour as a go to port for the developing windfarms off our coast. We fear that once one company has made a decision such as this, then others in the industry may follow suit.

Wick Harbour is geographically ideally situated to support the developing Offshore Renewables Industry. The Sectoral Marine Plan (October 2020) identifies 3 large areas to be developed off the Caithness coast. We have recently contracted a firm of consultants to develop a Business Plan, and this has identified that Wick Harbour has the potential to be the catalyst for up to 500 new jobs to the area over the coming years, which for Caithness is a huge opportunity to capitalise on.

Chairman – John Mackay

Harbourmaster – Malcolm Bremner

Treasurer – Mrs Norma Simpson

Obviously, the fact that there are no scheduled flights has already come as a big dis-advantage to our business and to the wider community economically, and if this is not rectified soon it could mean Caithness will miss out on the massive jobs boost that we all crave - we are sure you would not like to see the area miss out on this.

We would urge you to use your political influence and experience to strongly lobby for the re-instatement of scheduled flights to Wick Airport. We recognise that there has already been a concerted effort made on this subject by the Caithness Chamber of Commerce, Councillors and business representatives, but hope that what we have illustrated will hit home how important the airport is in helping to attract new business to the area.

With that in mind we would respectfully ask if you could make representations to the Transport Minister and others who may have influence, highlighting the need for scheduled airport services at Wick to be resumed at the earliest possible opportunity.

We look forward to hearing from you with any update in due course.

Yours sincerely

John Mackay

John Mackay
Chairman
Wick Harbour Authority

This letter will be circulated to Caithness Transport Forum, Caithness Chamber of Commerce, Councillors, MP & MSP

Appendix C – Gills Harbour

GILLS HARBOUR Ltd REPORT TO CAITHNESS TRANSPORT FORUM ON WINTER 2020/21.

1) COVID BLOWS: The 2020/21 financial year that ends within weeks has been one of the most challenging for over a century, following on the unexpected re-appearance of a world-wide medieval-style plague.

The international economy sector that was most stricken by the Covid 19 pandemic involved 'hospitality', with businesses providing transport and tourism services especially hit hard.

Official measures akin to wartime 'martial law' were introduced in the UK, so that ferry sailing times were effectively dictated to from above, whilst draconian restrictions on the numbers and status of those carried meant that only 'essential' workers were allowed to board. During lock-down periods, the convenient mid-day year-round crossing from Gills had to be sacrificed.

Pentland Ferries Ltd (PFL), the family firm that operates on the Gills to St Margaret's Hope 'short sea route' across the Pentland Firth on normal commercial lines, was still basking in the news that its £14 million, British-designed flagship 85 metre ROPAX vessel *Alfred* had been voted by industry professionals as the World's 2019 'Ship of the Year' in the ferries category, when the virus bombshell hit.

After some months there were fears for the enterprising family firm's future at Gills Harbour, somewhat alleviated when the Scottish Government granted £198,000, a sum that Mr Banks said covered just 10% of PFL's operating costs for the period.

In early January 2021, Mr Andrew Banks, PFL's managing director revealed that there had been a 70% reduction in business since the pandemic struck Scotland in March 2020. His oldest daughter Ms Kathryn Scollie revealed that, during the prolonged lockdown phases, passenger numbers had crashed by 97%.

This was in a lengthy interview with her that was *The Orcadian's* front-page 'splash' story on 04.03.21 ... with a half-page continuation inside.

PFL's director Ms Scollie stated that international travel restrictions had hampered plans to sell *Alfred's* predecessor ship *Pentalina*.

Her father earlier stated that the company that does not normally receive a single penny of taxpayers' revenue subsidy had received a modicum of Government assistance, but that this only covered 'approximately 10% of operational outgoings'.

A raft of short term savings ... including closing the Gills office and cafeteria temporarily to potential 'essential' passengers ... were put in place from 02.01.21. The temporary shutting of the cafeteria and waiting room at Gills were also designed to minimise staff exposure to the virus.

Whilst incoming freight for such as supermarket shelves remained fairly stable, outgoing live shellfish movements were hard hit by the closure of most restaurants/bistros in Europe. This was compounded after the 2021 New Year by the clearly-inadequate Brexit 'solutions' that had been agreed with the European Commission. This led to knock-on problems for large articulated-trucks carrying aerated 'vivier tanks' keeping the shell-fish alive on the long trip via England's South Coast exit ports and arrival at their opposite facilities on the other side of the English Channel and their eventual destinations in Spain or Portugal, so long as the Channel ports' delays had not proved too long.

2) NEW TIDAL-STREAM BOSS: SIMEC Atlantis Energy (SAE), the listed company that operates the sub-sea MeyGen tidal stream 'demonstration' unit in the Pentland Firth's Inner Sound just one mile from Gills Harbour ... appointed Mr Graham Reid as its new CEO. He replaces Atlantis founder Mr Tim Cornelius now CEO of Inverness-based Global Energy Group that operates the Nigg Energy Park on the Cromarty Firth. The former has been manufacturing & assembling tidal turbines for SAE for some years

Mr Reid is a civil engineer by background with major subway and surface rail projects behind him, as well as hands-on experience of running large-scale renewables operations for a little-known, but highly successful, British-owned company operating in North America.

Mr Reid states that a key challenge for MeyGen is to prove tidal stream electricity generation 'at scale' and he urged the UK Government to set aside funds in the next Contract for Difference specifically for tidal.

He believes that this could help to create a new renewable energy industry in making ... as well as deploying ... tidal turbines. 'New' energy concepts and export sales is something the UK has failed to achieve in harnessing solar or wind-power as both largely use imported hardware.

The last neap-tide sequence in February saw a major sub-sea inspection survey tasked by SAE at its MeyGen site, just one mile out into the Pentland Firth's Inner Sound from Gills Harbour.

Three workboats were temporarily based at Gills for the duration. Those were the near-new catamaran *Athenia*, operated as a ROV platform by Roving Eye Enterprises of Orphir, Scapa Flow and the *Green Quest*, a vessel that doubles as a North Sea wind tender and belongs to Green Marine (UK) Ltd of Stromness, also Orkney. The little Cromarty Firth tender *Nigg Bay* was on hand as guard boat/safety vessel.

3) ALFRED IS SAILED 'SOUTH OF THE BORDER' FOR DRY-DOCK.

In February 2021, *Alfred* sailed out of Scottish waters for the first time since her arrival 'home' in late 2019. There was 'fog on the Tyne' when vessel arrived for her first annual inspection/refit. PFL had intended to re-deploy *Pentalina* on the short-sea run but could not do so as Orkney Harbours ... a wholly-owned subsidiary of Orkney Islands Council ... had negotiated a reduction in fees for the latter ship at her berth at Kirkwall's Hatston deep-water pier. But this only applied if *Pentalina* was not being used for commercial purposes. So islanders had to do without a short-sea service from Gills for a week in late February whilst *Alfred* was in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, rather than in the company's traditional use of the Aberdeen dry-dock.

4) THE PLAGUE THAT SCOTLAND EVADED.

Robinson Crusoe author Daniel Defoe is best known locally for linking Land's End & John O'Groats in print for the first time; otherwise it could have been Tol Pedn Penwith & Duncansby Head, which does not have the same familiar ring.

That was in his '*A Tour thro' the whole island of Great Britain*', published in three volumes from 1724/27.

Earlier in that decade, the pioneering journalist has found that there was a ready market for relatively recent history in the first-person with his *Journal of the Plague Year*, about the horrors of the 1665/7

Great Plague of London. From parish funeral records, official documents and survivors, Defoe estimated that 70,000 had died, but modern scholars add 30,000 to that number.

Scotland had been hit by periodic unwelcome visits of the Plague at intervals since the 1348/52 Black Death.

On outbreak in 1635 in Edinburgh was particularly vicious.

Prompt preventive action by the Government in the shape of the Scottish Privy Council ... the Three Estates (Parliament) was not sitting ... ensured that the 1665 outbreak did not reach Scotland.

The Border was swiftly closed and a series of Acts prevented any traffic with affected countries especially England and the Netherlands, Scotland's two biggest trading partners.

Even when the disease was on the wane there, goods from the above were still subject to a full forty-day quarantine; an approach that is very similar to that used in late 2019/early 2020 in several Far East and Oceanic states.

5) CAN ROAD EQUIVALENT TARIFF ... RET ... GIVE TRANS-PENTLAND FERRIES AN EARLY BOOST, POST-BREXIT AND AFTER COVID?

The use of RET ... Road Equivalent tariff ... has led to substantial fare reductions since it was fully rolled out to all Firth of Clyde and Hebrides routes in late 2015, substantially boosting tourist traffic.

The system was promised to be introduced by mid-2018 on trans-Pentland routes by Minister Mr Humza Yousaf, but his self-imposed deadline passed without this happening.

Now his successor Mr Paul Wheelhouse is stating that operations during the Covid crisis is delaying consideration of a system whereby the subsidy is paid to ferry users, not the operator.

Perhaps the most stunning revelation in Mr Scollie's *Orcadian* interview was that the Scottish Government had never offered RET to Pentland Ferries, but a system called Farebox.

The latter had not been approved by the European Commission under 'state-aid' rules, but permission from Brussels is no longer required post-Brexit.

All of this is a bit ironic on Pentland Ferries, as the broad RET scheme was devised by Andrew Banks's *Pentland Hero* book biographer. At the time, Mr Roy

Pedersen was the senior civil servant with the transport brief at the Inverness-based state jobs agency Highlands & Islands Development Board, later renamed Highlands & Islands Enterprise.

ENDS

Appendix D – Transport Scotland Ferries

Caithness Transport Forum - 11 March 2021

Transport Scotland Ferries Unit Update

Northern Isles Ferry Service contract

- The new Northern Isles Ferry Service (NIFS) contract commenced on 30 June 2021 and since then Transport Scotland and Serco NorthLink Ferries (SNF) have continued to have regular progress review meetings on commitments.
- A non-commercially sensitive copy of the new contract will be published on the Transport Scotland website as soon as possible in 2021.
- A key benefit of this new contract is the in-built flexibility, allowing the ferry services to be amended to reflect future changes in demand across the important sectors of the islands' economies – seafood, tourism, fishing, aquaculture, food and drink and farming, subject to demand and availability of funds.

Covid-19 update

Current performance under Covid-19

- This government is acutely aware that supporting island communities through the Route Map and the Transport Transition Plan has been a complex issue, not least for ferry operators and services.
- The new contract has allowed vital funding support and operational flexibility in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, ensuring the ferry services continue to meet the needs of islanders and businesses throughout these unprecedented times and into the future.
- Throughout the pandemic we have relied upon our ferry operators to help us to communicate and reinforce Scottish Ministers' policy, and upon individual travellers making responsible judgements.
- To ensure sufficient capacity on the Northern Isles and in line with guidance SNF has been operating to full normal seasonal timetable.
- SNF has made provisions for some bookings to be held for islander travel. For example, a set number of 30 spaces per journey were allocated to key workers and NHS patients to make sure the essential travel demand is managed. They continue to work closely with NHS partners to ensure NHS patient transfer can be fast tracked and accommodated.
- Transport Scotland has been engaging with SNF on the level of messaging and checks surrounding essential travel on their services.

- From the outset of the recent restrictions, SNF have had clear messaging throughout the booking process, in ports and on board the vessels. This directs users to the SG messaging around essential travel and to ensure their journey is necessary.
- SNF have reintroduced their activity to challenge people at the point of booking and in ports before boarding as to whether or not their journey falls within the permitted category.
- However it is not possible for ferry operators to require evidence given the range of circumstances where this would be impossible to verify (such as caring responsibilities or being part of a support bubble) but this additional level of challenge should act as a further deterrent for those making unnecessary journeys.
- SNF also reserve their position to report any suspected breaches of the regulations or abuse of its staff in carry out checks to Police Scotland.

Covid-19 testing

- While the Minister for Public Health and Sport and Minister for Energy, Connectivity and the Islands held a constructive meeting with island representatives on 26 February, no final decision was taken on island entry point testing, as there are practical challenges that still need to be taken into consideration.
- Scottish Government Testing Strategy has been developed with clear advice from the clinical and scientific advisers.
- Testing is reliable only for those with symptoms. It provides a single point in time assessment of whether a person has the virus. Sadly, it does not mean they will not go on to develop the virus. As such, testing is only one measure of protection against COVID-19, alongside a strong emphasis on robust infection prevention and control (IPC) measures.
- In line with work on other modes of public transport, Transport Scotland and SNF have taken a risk-based approach to setting out how services can operate safely and ensuring that physical distancing measures remain in effect.
- SNF have taken operational considerations into account, including how passengers will board and move around the vessel and terminals, provision of signage and markings and blocking off some seating to ensure physical distancing.
- Additionally, SNF have put in place measures to keep passengers and crew safe, including provision of hand sanitiser, intensive cleaning regimes, sole occupancy of cabins, signage and queueing systems. Transport Scotland continues to rely upon SNF to help to communicate and reinforce Scottish Ministers' policy, and upon individual travellers making responsible judgements.

MV Hamnavoe dry dock

- Transport Scotland and SNF understand the frustration these mandatory maintenance periods for vessels can cause to island communities, but it is a regulatory requirement that the MV Hamnavoe completes her dry dock to ensure her continued operation for the remaining 51 weeks of the year.
- The NIFS contract states that the operator must use their best endeavours to search for suitable tonnage available on the charter market, during relief periods, taking account of the specific requirements of both Scrabster and Stromness.
- Given the short 5 day period of unavailability and the scarcity of tonnage on the open market for short-term lease arrangements and the unique vessel / port configurations finding a suitable replacement RoPax vessel proved difficult.
- SNF investigated the operational suitability and feasibility of utilising the RoPax MV Pentalina from Pentland Ferries to substitute for the MV Hamnavoe and confirmed that she is not suitable. There were a number of factors that made her deployment impossible. In the absence of replacement tonnage being sourced, the freight vessel option was invoked.
- The operator ensured there were arrangements in place for transfers for those wishing to cross the Pentland Firth via Pentland Ferries while the freight vessel was used as cover. While the option of using of a freight vessel as cover is not ideal, the operator has to work within the limits of vessel availability and the specific nature of the ports and crossings served.
- Transport Scotland continue to engage with SNF on the vessel replacement issue on Scrabster-Stromness route. Relief tonnage planning for MV Hamnavoe's next scheduled dry dock will again commence in adequate time to try and source a suitable relief vessel, within the constraints outlined.

Group Tours

- SNF engagement with VisitScotland and analysis on the likely shape of the coach market for 2021 supported the initial decision to cancel provisional reservations. This decision was undertaken to allow the booking system to open for 2021 whilst still making some assumptions about the levels of restrictions that may be in place (and avoiding subsequent cancellations as were experienced this year).
- SNF continues to engage on the issue with relevant bodies and have recently attended Visit Shetland/Shetland Hotel Group and Shetland Tourism Association meetings where we understand the matter has been discussed at length.
- SNF continue to review their position based on available space and any developments on the carriage of mixed groups (i.e. non-household) in tourist coaches from Public Health officials.
- The Scottish Government have announced several funding initiatives to support both the coach operators and the hospitality and tourism sector as a whole during these challenging times.

Ferry vouchers

- In the light of the additional restrictions announced by the First Minister on 4 January, it was confirmed that those people who use their concessionary ferry vouchers to book a journey by 31 March this year but are not able to travel due to the COVID-19 lockdown restrictions will be able to use these ferry vouchers up to the end of September 2021.

Ferry Fares on the Pentland Firth

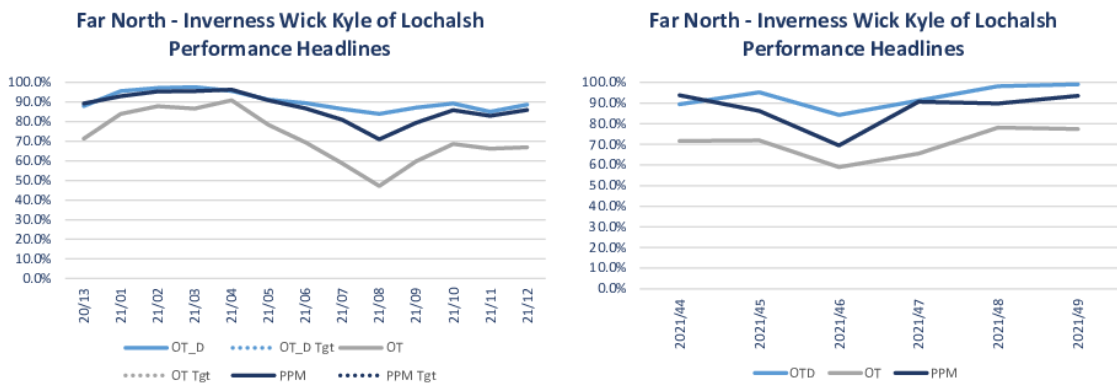
- The Scottish Government remains committed to reducing fares on ferry routes across the Pentland Firth.
- This work was necessarily paused in March 2020 while Scottish Government resources were pivoted to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, however work has now resumed, and officials are considering the impact of the new interim Subsidy Control rules following the EU Exit on 1 January 2021.

END

8 March 2021

Appendix E – ScotRail Alliance

Far North - Inverness Wick Kyle of Lochalsh Line of Route Performance Profile



Far North - Inverness Wick Kyle of Lochalsh

Top10 Incidents - Previous 6 Weeks

Inc Dt	Inc Loc	Memo	Inc Cse Dsc	Bus Cd Nm	Ppm Fail D	Canc
13/02/21	LRG FR5	LRG FR5 SNOW DRIFTS	SNOW	NETWORK RAIL	7	7
16/01/21	FRN TAI	FRN TAI LANDSLIP	EARTHSLIP	NETWORK RAIL	6	0
14/02/21	DIN	DIN 20 ESR SL	EARTHSLIP	NETWORK RAIL	3	0
10/02/21	INVERNESS	2H81 18 LATE START INV	WEATHER	TOC ON SELF	3	0
01/02/21	LRG	LRG RETB FLR	RADIO FLR	NETWORK RAIL	3	0
05/02/21	ARD	ARD FLOODING	SEV FLOOD	NETWORK RAIL	3	3
10/02/21	GGI HMS	GGI HMS PTS FLR	SEV SNOW	NETWORK RAIL	3	0
19/01/21	INV DIN	INV DIN BROKEN RAIL	RAIL FLAW	NETWORK RAIL	2	0
02/02/21	DIN	2H81 CAPED DIN 158711 FLR	CAB SAFETY	TOC ON SELF	2	2
27/01/21	WCK	2H56 DRIVER WCK	DRIVER	TOC ON SELF	2	1

Far North - Inverness Wick Kyle of Lochalsh Line of Route Performance Profile

Top 10 Causes over the past 6 Weeks

	Inc	PPMf	Canc
EARTHSLIP	30	9	0
SNOW	4	9	9
CAB SAFETY	7	8	2
WEATHER	8	8	2
DRIVER	14	6	3
SEV SNOW	4	6	1
RADIO FLR	2	4	0
BELOW SBAR	4	4	1
TRACK FLT	2	4	1
NOCAUSE ID	21	3	0

Key Location Headline Stats

Location	OT_D	OT	PPM
ROGART	71.4%	0.0%	50.0%
FORSINARD	62.2%	56.5%	71.0%
GARVE	65.7%	74.3%	89.2%
WICK	100.0%	72.4%	82.8%
ARDGAY	61.3%	35.3%	72.2%
HELMSDALE	60.0%	59.8%	79.9%
BRORA	60.7%	55.2%	75.8%
LAIRG	48.0%	48.8%	74.7%
KYLEOFLOC	97.3%	74.0%	92.7%
THURSO	75.8%	70.5%	83.8%
GEORGMASJ	76.2%	72.3%	84.3%
STRCARRON	79.4%	84.6%	95.0%
ACHNASHEN	73.3%	81.3%	94.3%
TAIN	41.1%	42.5%	80.5%
FEARN	37.6%	43.6%	80.3%
INVERGRDN	35.8%	46.6%	81.5%
INVERNESS	93.2%	72.2%	87.0%
DINGWALL	62.6%	67.4%	87.7%

Appendix F – Highland Council Roads

The roads team in Caithness have been busy doing permanent hot tar repairs in the last 2 weeks, mainly on high speed twin lane roads but also some dangerous defects on single track roads. It is our intention to carry on with permanent pot hole repairs for the next few weeks until the end of the Financial year. It is planned to carry out some extensive permanent patching and tarring works in the last week on March and the first week of April. This will mainly be on highspeed twin lane roads.

The extended period of winter weather through January and February had a significant impact on our road network. We are currently assessing all the damage done by the freeze thaw action and are compiling a new priority list for the coming years surfacing programme, this will need to be approved at The Caithness Area Committee in April by the local members. Once it has been agreed we can share our programme with you at your next meeting.

For Mr Mowat from Gills harbour, he will be happy to hear there is permanent hot tar patching planned for the road down to Gills in the next couple of weeks along with a few badly potholed section of the A836 near Gills.

Appendix G – BEAR Scotland

NW Trunk Road Unit Caithness and Sutherland		BEAR Scotland Works Programme 2020/21				
Route	Scheme Name	Work Description	Start	Finish	Status	Value £
A99	A99 South of Mid Clyth	Resurfacing	29/06/2020	02/07/2020	Completed	100,000
A99	A99 Wick	Footway Improvements	06/07/2020	31/03/2021	On Site	46,000
A9	A9 Thurso	Footway Improvements	13/07/2020	03/09/2020	Completed	50,000
A9	A9 Lothmore to Portgower	Drainage Improvements	13/07/2020	30/04/2021	On Site	40,000
A9	A9 Achrimsdale	Resurfacing	20/07/2020	30/07/2020	Completed	240,000
A9	A9 Loch Stemster	Resurfacing	24/08/2020	28/08/2020	Completed	175,000
A9	A9 North of Ousdale Machine Patching	Resurfacing	31/08/2020	01/09/2020	Completed	35,000
A9	A9 Scrabster	Resurfacing	02/09/2020	03/09/2020	Completed	50,000
A99	A99 South of Wick	Resurfacing	07/09/2020	09/09/2020	Completed	105,000
A9	A9 Evelix Garage	Resurfacing	10/09/2020	21/09/2020	Completed	250,000
A99	A99 North of Hempriggs	Resurfacing	10/09/2020	11/09/2020	Completed	90,000
A9	A9 1585 Dornoch	Bridge Parapet Repair	14/09/2020	15/09/2020	Completed	10,000
A9	A9 North of Tacher	Resurfacing	14/09/2020	16/09/2020	Completed	105,000
A9	A9 1900 C88 Lochend	culvert scour repair	21/09/2020	25/09/2020	Completed	15,000

	(Achavanich)					
A9	A9 Golspie	Resurfacing	22/09/2020	27/09/2020	Completed	105,000
A9	A9 Thurso South	Resurfacing	11/10/2020	26/10/2020	Completed	240,000
A9	A9 Navidale Roundabout	Resurfacing	11/10/2020	14/10/2020	Completed	50,000
A9	A9 Doll South Machine Patching	Resurfacing	12/10/2020	13/10/2020	Completed	50,000
A9	A9 Helmsdale	Resurfacing	27/10/2020	02/11/2020	Completed	140,000
A99	A99 20 Reisgill (Lybster)	Bridge Parapet Replacement and Concrete repairs	02/11/2020	29/01/2021	Not Started	100,000
A99	A99 Bruan	Resurfacing	04/11/2020	11/11/2020	Completed	160,000
A9	A9 Strathstevenson	Resurfacing	16/11/2020	17/11/2020	Completed	60,000
A9	A9 Dunrobin Castle	Resurfacing	18/11/2020	25/11/2020	Completed	150,000
A9	A9 Berriedale to Latheron	Embankment Repairs	20/11/2020	14/12/2020	Completed	50,000
A9 / A99 / A835	North Coast 500 Signing	Erection of new signs and posts	15/02/2021	30/04/2021	On Site	50,000
A9	A9 Brora	Footway Improvements	14/12/2020	30/04/2021	On Site	50,000
A99	A99 Lybster Resurfacing	Resurfacing	09/07/2021	16/07/2021	Not Started	120,000
A99	A99 North of Thrumster	Resurfacing	19/07/2021	30/07/2021	Not Started	150,000
A9	A9 1587 Evelix Cuthill Links (Dornoch)	Bridge Parapet Replacement	01/03/2021	26/03/2021	Not Started	50,000

A99	A99 South of Borrowston	Resurfacing	26/08/2021	03/09/2021	Not Started	140,000
A99	A99 South of Ulbster	Resurfacing	16/08/2021	25/08/2021	Not Started	120,000

BEAR Scotland Works Programme 2021/22 (draft)				
Work Description	Start	Finish	Status	Value £
Resurfacing	21/06/2021	28/06/2021	Not Started	100,000
Resurfacing	29/06/2021	30/06/2021	Not Started	50,000
Resurfacing	30/06/2021	01/07/2021	Not Started	50,000
Resurfacing	01/07/2021	02/07/2021	Not Started	50,000
Resurfacing	05/07/2021	06/07/2021	Not Started	55,225
Resurfacing	07/07/2021	08/07/2021	Not Started	50,000
Resurfacing	09/07/2021	16/07/2021	Not Started	159,537
Resurfacing	19/07/2021	30/07/2021	Not Started	277,509
Resurfacing	02/08/2021	13/08/2021	Not Started	237,267
Resurfacing	16/08/2021	25/08/2021	Not Started	175,000
Resurfacing	26/08/2021	03/09/2021	Not Started	163,981
Resurfacing	20/09/2021	24/09/2021	Not Started	105,000
Resurfacing	27/09/2021	30/09/2021	Not Started	95,000
Resurfacing	01/10/2021	05/10/2021	Not Started	60,000
Resurfacing	06/10/2021	11/10/2021	Not Started	100,000
Resurfacing	18/10/2021	19/10/2021	Not Started	50,000
Resurfacing	02/02/2022	04/02/2022	Not Started	80,000
Resurfacing	07/02/2022	11/02/2022	Not Started	100,000
Drainage Improvements	13/07/2020	30/04/2021	On Site	13,000
Footway Improvements	14/12/2020	30/04/2021	On Site	20,000

Signing	15/02/2021	30/04/2021	On Site	62,500
Roadmarking and Studding	19/04/2021	TBC	Not Started	125,000
Signing	03/05/2021	TBC	Not Started	30,000
Drainage Improvements	07/06/2021	TBC	Not Started	15,000
Footway Improvements	12/07/2021	TBC	Not Started	40,000
Drainage Improvements	02/08/2021	TBC	Not Started	50,000
Drainage Improvements	06/09/2021	TBC	Not Started	15,000
Repairs to Retaining Wall	04/10/2021	TBC	Not Started	10,000
Signing	01/11/2021	TBC	Not Started	30,000
Signing	06/12/2021	TBC	Not Started	20,000

Appendix H – Wick John O'Groats Airport / HIAL



Caithness transport forum update March 2021.

Airlines

Wick JOG Airport currently has no scheduled operators following the removal of services to Aberdeen and Edinburgh last year.

There continues to be stakeholder sessions and updates provided to all our partners and we have had the very positive news that the Scottish Government and Highland Council have agreed to part fund a Public Service Obligation (PSO).

COVID-19 Operations

HIAL continues to follow Scottish Government guidance for restrictions on General Aviation and Out of Hours flights which are currently prohibited.

HIAL continues to have a large amount of staff working from home and continues to take advantage of the furlough scheme. For those who cannot work from home social distancing in the workplace, PPE and enhanced cleaning regimes have been in place since the outbreak.

In addition to the Scottish Government guidance on area levels HIAL has introduced Airport COVID states as part of the contingency plans to maintain operations.

Wick JOG Airport is currently COVID State 0 – no staffing issues

Aircraft Movements

The aviation industry nationally and internationally continues to suffer under the global pandemic and from a HIAL perspective skeleton schedules are in operation throughout the group. HIAL Group stats below

Passengers

There were 1,156,909 (66.2%) fewer passengers last year due to the impact of the Covid 19 pandemic.

Aircraft Movements

For the full year there were 57,283 (42.5%) fewer movements than 2019.

Statistics for Wick JOG

Passengers

There were 10,889 (66.1%) fewer passengers last year due to the impact of the Covid 19 pandemic and loss of schedules.

Aircraft Movements

For the full year there were 940 (23.1%) fewer movements than 2019.

Projects

As detailed in the last update HIA continues to carry out capital projects. Planned for the next financial year are.

- Continued improvements to the surface water drainage
- Next steps for replacing the oil fuelled heating and hot water boiler
- Upgrades to runway drain covers
- Terminal building refurbishment works

Staffing levels

Security is at full complement with staff on furlough and a minimum amount of staff at the airport for day to day tasks and competency training.

ATC staffing is now at 4, our SATCO has regained his medical certificate and commenced training to revalidate at the end of April.

Our trainee ATCO is carrying out a reduced training programme and is furloughed part time with a validation date provisionally of September.

The Airport Fire Service continue to utilise flexible furlough with members of the team rotating.

Opening hours

The airfield is operating reduced hours and continues to engage with the Oil and Gas sector, FNA and Wiking helicopters to continually review the hours.

The 24/7 cover for emergency flights remains unchanged.

Reduction in Rescue and Firefighting Services (RFFS)

HIAL have applied to the CAA to reduce the RFFS category from 4 to 3. In the past our category was based around the scheduled operators and the size of their aircraft.

Category 3 will accommodate the aircraft currently using the airport with provision in place for operators to request a higher category when needed.

Brexit / HMRC

There is still uncertainty around the operation of ferry flights post Brexit as it is essentially a transfer of goods from one country to another, Far North Aviation is seeking guidance.

The airport manager and FNA have had meetings with HMRC on the 'next steps' to allow ferry flights to continue beyond July 2021. The airport has submitted customs control paperwork with a list of questions for HMRC and we await a response.

HIAL is currently assessing the impact of Brexit on our supply chain.

Airfield Advisory Fund

We're thrilled to announce that Wick John O'Groats Airport has been successful in a bid for the Airfield Development Advisory Fund (#ADAF). We'll benefit from professional guidance and advisory services across a range of disciplines through the Department for Transport (DfT) and the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA).