



Minutes of the Caithness Transport Forum

Date: 22 June 2023

Time: 10:00 – 12:00

Location: Pentland Hotel, Thurso / Microsoft Teams

Present

Trudy Morris	Caithness Chamber of Commerce
Laura O'Kane	Caithness Chamber of Commerce
Mike Willmot	Far North Line Community Rail Partnership
Mike Lunan	Friends of the Far North Rail Line
Dougie Cook	HIAL
Cllr Raymond Bremner	Highland Council
Cllr Ron Gunn	Highland Council
Cllr Willie Mackay	Highland Council
Cllr Struan Mackie	Highland Council
Mackenzie Sutherland	Highland Council
David Swanson	Highland Council PSO
David Summers	Highland Council Public Transport
Alexander Shale	Highland Council Roads
Iain Hall	ScotRail
Kris Bevan	Serco NorthLink
Robert Gillespie	Stagecoach
Bert Macleod	Thurso Community Council
John Deighan	Trade Union Council
Marco Bardelli	Transport Scotland

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:

Victoria Ross	Dounreay
Peter Faccenda	Focus North

Matthew Reiss (Councillor)	Highland Council
Helen Inkster	Pentland Ferries
Derek Glasgow	ScotRail
Maree Todd MSP	Scottish Government
Sandy Mackie	Scrabster Harbour Trust
Carole Whittaker	Transport Lead D&CCC
Ian Cormack	Wick Harbour

2. Minutes of last CTF meeting 22.03.23

- 2.1 The minutes were approved as an accurate record of the last meeting.
Proposed by – Cllr Willie Mackay, seconded by Cllr Ron Gunn.

3. Review of actions from last meeting

Completed actions

ACTION: CTF(2023)M001/A004: *Derek Glasgow to find out if there was a generic difference in the Far North Line and Kyle Line. Derek Glasgow advised Network Rail have commented that the line and structures are of similar age on both lines. So, there would be no definitive aspect that could be put down to age.*

ACTION: CTF(2023)M001/A005: *Jonathan Gunn to send updated roads report list to the Chair. – COMPLETED 22.03.23*

ACTION: CTF(2023)M001/A006: *Jonathan Gunn to send updated roads report list to the Chair once approved by the Caithness Committee. COMPLETE*

ACTION: CTF(2022)M003/A008 – Jonathan to speak to Kevin Mackay, the roads officer, and report back on when the Duncansby Head road is going to get some temporary patching done and find out about the road edge as well.

Cllr Willie Mackay has been in touch with Carole Whittaker. – OUTSTANDING – Cllr Willie Mackay said he would follow up for Carole Whittaker. **COMPLETE**

ACTION: CTF(2023)M001/A008: *Duncan MacRae to follow up with transport officers to confirm if all bus services could be added to digital displays and how this would be managed. Also to see if digital display height issue could be resolved.*

All registered services should be on digital displays, as well as any publicity outputs that are connected to the DIVA data which is managed by HiTRANS. The difference is that non-Stagecoach registration data is not electronic, so the process is manual for inclusion in the data; because the process is different, there has historically been a discrepancy in the inclusion of the data, but it should most definitely be included and it is very possible for it to be.

Please also note that, where available, real-time tracking data is made available in the timing information provided on the electronic displays. Where that isn't possible – either because (in the case of Stagecoach) the bus's tracking information is temporarily unavailable due to a lag in connection, or the ticket machine technology utilised doesn't allow for real-time tracking (while possible with most smaller operators, there are some updates required in this area to be fully useful and usable live information) – the information displayed reverts to timetabled data.

There were significant staffing issues within HiTRANS over the past year which has meant there is a substantial delay in inclusion of non-electronic bus data; this has affected electronic displays,

timetable notices and other onward forms of bus information provision (such as Traveline Scotland, Google Maps public transport info, etc.)

The approach here is two-fold:

- 1) Prioritise the manual data's inclusion in the data that feeds into publicity outputs, and
- 2) Longer term, get non-Stagecoach operators using electronic means for registration submissions so that the process is less arduous and prone to errors than it is when manual data entry is involved. **COMPLETE**

5.10.2 Duncan MacRae reported HiTRANS was producing a new bus services timetable with distribution expected 2nd week May.

Timetables have recently been published by HiTRANS, and were picked up by Stagecoach for distribution throughout Highland within the last couple of weeks. This was slightly later than anticipated because of a technical issue in generating timetables within the DIVA system. HC staff are looking to seek clarification from Stagecoach about the timescales involved in the timetables making their way to bus shelters/timetable cases in Highland generally and Caithness specifically. **COMPLETE**

Actions outstanding from prior meeting

ACTION: CTF(2023)M001/A001: *Trudy Morris to ask Transport Scotland to clarify the Subsidy Control rules restrictions as per their update on 22 March 2023 and to request an explanation on the MV Pentalina's unsuitability as a replacement vessel for the MV Hamnavoe whilst in dry dock. **Response from Paul Flynn, Ferries Directorate Transport Scotland (TM/CTF/2023/F-01) Re RET & MV Pentalina (see Appendix A)***

NEW ACTION Raised CTF2023 M002/A001: *Chair to respond to Paul Flynn regarding information on Island Connectivity Plan (ICP)*

NEW ACTION Raised CTF2023 M002/A002 *David Summers to send contacts to the Chair regarding representatives from Highland Council contributing to Island Connectivity Plan (ICP)*

ACTION: CTF(2023)M001/A002: *Trudy Morris to organise a meeting with John MacQuarrie at Scottish Rail Holdings.*

Meeting held on 31 May – Trudy Morris met with John MacQuarrie and discussed a number of topics: The importance of the line for the Far North and the need to ensure an equitable service, continued investment and improvements, catering provision, the Delmore loop, funding for Control Period 7 (CP7), the significant number of Network Rail issues on the line compared to the Kyle line.

John MacQuarrie reiterated commitment to rural lines such as the Far North Line. He outlined funding challenges for government going forward and the need to find innovative solutions for things like catering provision. He will look at line issues and status of Delmore Loop funding and that of CP7 and revert. John also gave a commitment to come to Caithness to discuss further. Trudy Morris will facilitate a meeting with John, the new Far North Community Rail Partnership and the Forum.

NEW ACTION Raised CTF2023 M002/A003: *Trudy Morris facilitate a meeting with John MacQuarrie, Scottish Rail Holdings, the Far North Community Rail Partnership and the Forum.*

ACTION: CTF(2023)M001/A003: *Trudy Morris to contact Alex Hynds (ScotRail) to ask is funding is still in place for the Delmore Loop. **Letter sent – pending update.***

NEW ACTION Raised CTF2023 M002/A004: *Chair to follow up with request for update on enquiry submitted to Alex Hinds regarding funding for Delmore Loop REF TM/CTF/2023/AH01*

ACTION: CTF(2023)M001/A007: *Cllr Raymond Bremner to supply information regarding the roads re-design to Trudy Morris.* **ONGOING**

Outstanding actions

4. Matters Arising

- 4.1 The Chair updated on the Focus North Partnership's transport and connectivity workstream. Funding was now in place to commission a demand study for both Caithness and Sutherland. Focus North was liaising with Highland Council and Cllr Richard Gale, Sutherland Community Planning Partnership. The study would look at integrated connectivity and innovative transport solutions for North Highland communities and sustainable future proofing solutions. Funding for the study had been made possible through Hub North Scotland and Focus North. CTF members will be consulted in due course to feed into the study, the process would also include community consultation.

5. Transport Updates

5.1 Wick John O'Groats Airport / HIAL

- 5.1.1 **A written update was provided from HIAL (Appendix B).** In addition Dougie Cook provided the following:

5.1.2 Increase in ferry flights projected over summer and business coming in from RAF flights.

5.1.3 ARC AeroSystems SATE trials pushed back until late August. Complex approval process causing delays. Community engagement planned with local schools. Public Relations Day in planning with invitation to Scottish Government with provisional date set in August with trial taking place on a Saturday.

5.1.4 Inglis Lyon, Managing Director of HIAL will retire at the end of June 2023. Stewart Adams had been appointed as Interim Managing Director.

CTF2023 M002/A004: Dougie Cook to extend invitation to Stewart Adams to meet with the stakeholders from the CTF

- 5.1.5 **A written update was provided from Highland Council PSO (Appendix C).** In addition David Swanson provided the following:

5.1.6 Passenger figures comfortably above pre-pandemic levels and approaching 2015 levels which was a good year of operation – indicating a recovery of demand for service.

5.1.7 Airport special opening on Saturday 23rd December for Christmas Services.

5.1.8 Notification of further 6.5% increase on airport charges starting 01.07.23, concern raised over short period of notice of changes (7 days)

5.1.9 Far North Aviation update on survey work, seeing 80% passengers are return customers, strong usage from oil and gas sector, strongly stated demand for later flights retuning from Aberdeen. Information from Vulcan regarding changes to provide for better connectivity. This will be reviewed against service timetable to see if improvements can be made.

5.1.10 Support has been granted through Highland Council and Eastern Airways to DYW North Highland for sponsorship of flights for Sail Training participants.

- 5.1.11 The Chair raised public feedback complaints regarding flight delays / cancellations. The Chair stressed that increased charges were unfavourable to the development of the PSO at Wick JOG Airport and urged HIAL to re-consider.

CTF2023 M002/A005: David Swanson to follow up with further information regarding flight delays 21.06.23

CTF2023 M002/A006: Dougie Cook to follow up with HIAL regarding late notice of 6.5% increase in airport charges and concern it was detrimental to development of PSO.

5.2 Scrabster Harbour

- 5.2.1 **A written update was provided (Appendix D).**
- 5.2.2 The Chair noted it was positive to see uptick in Cruise Ship bookings at Scrabster Harbour and increased tourist traffic into Thurso town centre and to local visitor attractions.

5.3 Wick Harbour

- 5.3.1 **A written update was provided (Appendix E).**

5.4 Gills Harbour

- 5.4.1 No written update was provided and no representative was present at the meeting.

5.5 Pentland Ferries

- 5.5.1 **A written update was provided (Appendix F).**

5.6 Serco NorthLink

- 5.6.1 An update was provided by Kris Bevan. Although already performing well and passenger volumes up 26% on route, numbers increased considerably in May as result of the Pentland Ferries failure. Passenger figures for period 1-5-2023: passengers 61,000 compared to 41,000 on the previous year up 50%, vehicles 22,000 compared to 15,500 on previous year up 40%, freight volumes 33,300 lay meters of freight compared to 20,300, up 64% on previous year. In response to surge in demand extra sailing cascaded across services in line with peak demand, sailings due to continue until end of June with normal service returning July with standard peak timetable. The Chair commented extra sailings were welcome during the period to ensure connectivity and it was encouraging to see passenger numbers increasing.
- 5.6.1 Fares and reservations system only open until end of September as waiting update on fares from Transport Scotland, this is impacting forward bookings for customers.
- 5.6.3 Kris Bevan commented 250 dogs were carried over the last six weeks in the newly opened dog lounge on the MW Hamnavoe, increasing demand for passengers travelling with pets.
- 5.6.4 During period of failure of the MV Pentalina worked closely with haulage customers moving bookings on to late night sailings to maximise capacity of services.

5.7 Highland Council Roads

- 5.7.1 Alex Shale commented on roads programme, works had been completed at several locations throughout Caithness with planned tarring and resurfacing planned throughout July. Jet patcher

working in the Forse and Lythmore areas. Updated Caithness Roads Programme document list provided (**Appendix G**)

- 5.7.2 The Chair raised a complaint made to the CTF from a member of the public who regularly travelled from Helmsdale for retail needs regarding the condition of the road surfaces both within Wick town centre and in and around the Wick retail park.

CTF2023 M002/A007: Cllr Willie Mackay to follow up with contact details of Landlord / Estate Manager of Wick retail park. Chair to follow up with letter regarding complaint and request for information on plans to address issues.

John Deighan made request that action was taken for the Co-op car park in Thurso regarding surface conditions.

CTF2023 M002/A008: Cllr Willie Mackay to follow up with contact details of Landlord / Estate Manager. Chair to follow up with letter regarding complaint and request for information on plans to address issues.

- 5.7.3 Cllr Raymond Bremner highlighted the £2.9 million funding package made available to Caithness for roads resurfacing and the need to make sure this is delivered over the time period. This will be monitored and closely managed. The Chair reiterated her point made at the meeting on 22 March that Highland Council need to be more proactive in their approach to making the public aware of the ongoing investment in the programme of works and suggested a press release be issued by the Highland Council

5.8 BEAR Scotland / Transport Scotland

- 5.8.1 **A written update was provided (Appendix H).** Marco Bardelli highlighted improvement works made at Latheronwheel, Allangrange, Ousdale, Geiselittle, Berridale and Cambusavie Bends Budgets are tighter across the programme and would need to be rejigged based on assessment of road condition and best value.
- 5.8.2 40 mile per hour buffer zone schemes to improve road safety were in the pipeline. These would take place in conjunction with the settlements earmarked for 20mph zones within the Highland Council area.

5.9 Highland Council Public Transport

- 5.9.1 David Summers noted timetable updates were now displayed in bus stops. Some repairs were needed for display cases in order to accommodate new timetables. Highland Council would be liaising with HITRANS to keep data flowing to ensure these timetables were correct and up to date. New timetables for all bus service providers were correct and present on <https://www.travelinescotland.com/>
- David Summers noted the height of the electronic displays was an issue and would look into this.
- 5.9.2 He also noted timetables had been adapted to maximise connectivity with airport flight schedule, although could not meet all the scheduled services, particularly early morning flights and Sundays.
- The Chair highlighted with support from Dougie Cook that Sunday air services were particularly busy. Dougie Cook raised requests by customers for services to lay over longer at the airport, as it had been noted that the bus often left before passengers had disembarked from the aircraft.
- CTF2023 M002/A009:** David Summers to liaise with Dougie Cook regarding longer bus layovers at the airport.
- 5.9.3 The Chair raised a request which had been issued to the CTF for timetables to be printed for local businesses who are seeing increased demand from tourists looking to visit local tourist attractions outwith the town centre.

Michael Willmot highlighted a timetable example issued by Durness Bus company which featured a map alongside the timetable in order to help visitors with locations and routes. **(Appendix I)**.

CTF2023 M002/A010: David Summers to see if combined timetable can be printed and copies distributed.

- 5.9.4 Cllr Ron Gunn raised comments brought to him from the public regarding the JOG / Thurso services provided by Aaron's of Wick and Stagecoach running very close together. David Summers suggested this was due to school bus requirements.

5.10 Stagecoach

- 5.10.1 **A written update was provided (Appendix J)**. Robert Gillespie reported a growing demand in uptake on the X99 service, commenting that buses on the X99 route to Inverness were at capacity on arrival in Inverness. Passenger numbers across services were increasing.

- 5.10.2 Michael Willmot commented that much of the X99 route was common with the rail line and it would be beneficial to have a timetable showing both services in one document.

CTF2023 M002/A011: Robert Gillespie to investigate feasibility of an integrated bus and rail services timetable for X99.

- 5.10.3 Mackenzie Sutherland noted an appetite to reinstate the Caithness Bus Users Group. Cllr Willie Mackay responded that this was in progress and the Council would bring bus service providers together at the upcoming Association of Community Councils meeting to look at reinstatement of this group.

5.11 ScotRail

- 5.11.1 Iain Hall provided an update on industrial relations and commented outlook was positive, with decrease in disruptions to services expected. This had allowed more promotion of services to encourage people back to the railway including "Kids for a Quid" offer.

Passenger figures were sitting below pre pandemic levels, with recovery in sight. Passenger figures 2023/24 (average 4 week period) 18,829 people on far north line, slightly below pre pandemic of 19k but significant improvement on previous year at around 13.5k. Good growth seen across the north of Scotland.

New timetable released in May to reflect the demands of a leisure driven market. Business travel still lagging pre-pandemic figures. Late night services affected by availability of drivers due to driver training lag during pandemic. Recruitment / training drive in place.

4.8% fares rise will come into place 18.07.23 but would not affect season ticket or flexi pass holders. Abolition of peak fares trial would begin October 23.

- 5.11.2 Mike Lunan raised a question on expected dates for return of staffing levels and complete roster for all services, catering, drivers, passenger managers. Iain Hall updated for drivers this was expected summer 2024, a joint working group was in place with the trade unions to allow expansion of Sunday services. Recruitment was ongoing in hospitality, but had faced same challenges as experienced across hospitality sector. Filling roster gaps was a high priority for senior management teams.

Catering provision and access to drinking water was raised as a key concern by members for users of the FarNorth Rail Line. This will be taken forward by the Chair in the conversation with John MacQuarrie at Scottish Rail Holdings. Iain Hall noted services running with hospitality were published on the ScotRail website in advance.

- 5.11.3 Cllr Struan Mackie noted the franchise agreement for the Caledonian Sleeper was transferring to Scottish Rail Holdings and hoped for improvement for through connection for ticketing and connectivity of services.

CTF2023 M002/A012: Chair to follow up with John MacQuarrie, Scottish Rail Holdings at meeting with regards to catering services, Delmore Loop and franchise plans for Caledonian Sleeper.

5.12 Far North Line Community Rail Partnership

- 5.12.1 Michael Willmot provided an update on the designation of the Far North Line Community Rail Partnership (FNLCRP) announced by Scottish Transport Minister, Kevin Stewart MSP on 24.05.23. **(Appendix K).**

The FNLCRPP would work closely with the Friends of the Far North Rail Line.

A key aspect of the FNLCRP was to focus on promoting and maximising benefits to local communities. Forming links with individual volunteers and community groups along the line, in the far north this included Thurso Community Development Trust, H&I Climate Hub and RSBP Forsinard; including their application to become a world heritage site (railway low carbon transport option for visitors). Recruitment of station adopters and volunteers would take place at all viable stations, funding available through Scotrail to support station improvement activity.

A key activity of the FNLCRP was promotion of other sustainable travel modes, working closely with Scottish Rural and Transport Community (SRTIC) and promoting the integration of services and campaigning for improved timetable information.

- 5.12.2 Mike Lunan raised comment that better provision should be made for integration of connecting bus services from Thurso Railway Station to Scrabster Harbour for ferry services to Orkney. It was also suggested that Thurso Railway Station / The Far North Railway Line could be promoted as the gateway for travel to Orkney. Kris Bevan commented that NorthLink had previously applied for funding to provide electric minibus services from Thurso Railway Station to Scrabster Harbour through Transport Scotland Accessibility Funding but had been unsuccessful.

CTF2023 M002/A013: Kris Bevan to provide information to the Chair on application for EV bus Thurso / Scrabster for future reference and to feed into Focus North transport study. **COMPLETE**

6. Any Other Business

- 6.1.1 The Chair noted a response had been made on behalf of the Forum to the HITRANS case for change consultation. **(Appendix L & M)**
- 6.1.2 Cllr Willie Mackay noted he would be presenting the Mobility and Access Committee - Members - Publicity - Strategy Convener Letter 13.02.23 **(Appendix N)** to the Caithness Disabled Access Panel.

7. Date of Next Meeting

- 7.1 Next meeting to take place on **Wednesday 8th November 2023** both in person and hybrid.

8. Actions ongoing from previous meetings

ACTION: CTF(2023)M001/A007: Cllr Raymond Bremner to supply information regarding the roads re-design to Trudy Morris.

10. Actions arising from this meeting

CTF2023 M002/A001: Chair to respond to Paul Flynn regarding information on Island Connectivity Plan (ICP).

CTF2023 M002/A002 David Summers to send contacts to the Chair regarding representatives from Highland Council contributing to *Island Connectivity Plan (ICP)*.

CTF2023 M002/A003: Trudy Morris facilitate a meeting with John MacQuarrie, Scottish Rail Holdings, the Far North Community Rail Partnership and the Forum.

CTF2023 M002/A004: Chair to follow up with request for update on enquiry submitted to Alex Hinds regarding funding for Delmore Loop REF TM/CTF/2023/AH01.

CTF2023 M002/A004: Dougie Cook to extend invitation to Stewart Adams to meet with the stakeholders from the CTF.

Dougie Cook updated on 14.08.23 In his appointment as Interim Managing Director of HIAL, Stewart Adam's focus is to steer our strategic priorities to ensure safe and regulatory compliant airports while we complete the process for a permanent successor. Unfortunately, during this brief period of transition for HIAL, Stewart will not be able to accept your invitation. However, I will ensure that the invite is passed to the Managing Director when the permanent appointment is made.

HIAL are committed to ensuring the ongoing connectivity of our communities and this PSO is of high importance to us. As a team, we are here to support with further questions, feedback, or concerns.

CTF2023 M002/A005: David Swanson to follow up with further information regarding flight delays 21.06.23.

David Swanson Updated 17.08.22 Flight delays on 21.06.23 were the result of a late incoming aircraft on the Newcastle-Aberdeen route, with subsequent ground handling delays as a result of the aircraft's late arrival in Aberdeen.

In a slightly wider context regarding reliability, the service was subject to a period of poor performance/reliability across May and June. The Highland Council worked closely with Eastern Airways and stakeholders to understand the reasons for this and to put a plan in place to return reliability to acceptable levels. This proved to be successful and indications from July/August 2023 are that performance and reliability have returned to expected levels.

CTF2023 M002/A006: Dougie Cook to follow up with HIAL regarding late notice of 6.5% increase in airport charges and concern it was detrimental to development of PSO.

Dougie Cook updated on 14.08.23 HIAL is funded by the Scottish Government by means of a subsidy. The subsidy falls under specific legislation to enable critical air connectivity for our more remote communities that would otherwise be commercially unviable.

Because of the subsidy's legislation, HIAL are not permitted to offer further subsidy in the form of discounted fees and charges. If HIAL were to offer further subsidy, then it would breach the provisions of the Subsidy Control Act.

CTF2023 M002/A007: Cllr Willie Mackay to follow up with contact details of Landlord / Estate Manager of Wick retail park. Chair to follow up with letter regarding complaint and request for information on plans to address issues.

Cllr Willie Mackay update 17.07.23 - A couple of contact workmen were white lining and repainting the Disabled areas yesterday and filling in Potholes on the area between Superdrug and B and M.

The other potholes as you come of the A99 towards Lidl have been marked with white paint in preparation for filling in.

CTF2023 M002/A008: Cllr Willie Mackay to follow up with contact details of Landlord / Estate Manager. Chair to follow up with letter regarding complaint and request for information on plans to address issues.

Cllr Willie Mackay update 12.07.23 The Thurso car park is Highland Council owned and the maintenance responsibility remains with Highland Council, the managing service is listed as Communities and Place – General Fund. Highland Council Roads Department have been asked to quote for repairing the car park but have had to decline due to capacity and commitment to spend all our Capital Budget for this year.

CTF2023 M002/A009: David Summers to liaise with Dougie Cook regarding longer bus layovers at the airport.

CTF2023 M002/A010: David Summers to see if combined timetable can be printed and copies distributed.

CTF2023 M002/A011: Robert Gillespie to investigate feasibility of an integrated bus and rail services timetable for X99.

Robert Gillespie updated 06.07.23 We put timetables into the travel agents in both Wick and Thurso. And one will be dropped off at the tourist info office at John O’Groats. There was also a new delivery of timetables this week from Hi-Trans which we will have distributed within the week. We are struggling with them as there are no proper places to fix them to in a lot of the bus stops/shelters and we are left with no choice but to attach with tape which as you know doesn't look the best to anyone seeing them.

CTF2023 M002/A012: Chair to follow up with John MacQuarrie, Scottish Rail Holdings at meeting with regards to catering services, Delmore Loop and franchise plans for Caledonian Sleeper.

CTF2023 M002/A013: Kris Bevan to provide information to the Chair on application for EV bus Thurso / Scrabster for future reference and to feed into Focus North transport study. **COMPLETE**

Response from Paul Flynn, Ferries Directorate Transport Scotland (TM/CTF/2023/F-01) Re RET & MV Pentalina

Hi Laura, I hope this finds you well, and I hope you are enjoying nice weather like we are here!

I've managed to follow up internally with colleagues, and I'm now in a position to provide the update below.

Following UK Exit from the EU, a new domestic subsidy control regime has been introduced in the UK, as set out in the Subsidy Control Act 2022. This builds on the interim regime that was put in place by the UK-EU Trade & Cooperation Agreement. While the domestic regime creates a new legal framework with new processes etc, it is not materially different from EU State aid rules in its principles and outcomes. It would therefore, in the same way as under EU State aid rules, be seen as distorting the market if Scottish Government introduced RET on ferry routes where there are private operators. Any introduction of new RET measures on lifeline ferry services in Scotland would now need to comply with the requirements of the Subsidy Control Act 2022.

As the Forum will be aware, long term ferry fares policy is being reviewed through the Islands Connectivity Plan as part of our wider Fair Fares Review.

I hope the extra information is helpful.

Warm regards,

Paul.

Paul Flynn

Ferries Policy Manager | Ferries Directorate | Transport Scotland

Contactable on MS Teams / Email or T: 07824 474 248

Wick John O'Groats Airport

Ceangailte • Connected

Caithness Transport Forum update June 2023.

Public Service Obligation (PSO)

Disruption over the winter period due to snow and ice was minimal, however the airport has experienced unusually high cancellations due to fog for this time of year.

The summer schedule started in April with a slight reduction in flights and small adjustments to the timetable.

Passenger numbers have seen a slight increase since the summer schedule was introduced.

Aviation Statistics

HIAL has not yet seen a return to pre-pandemic levels of passenger numbers, however the trend is still on an upward trajectory.

As per my last update business travel remains far below pre-Covid levels.

Statistics for HIAL:

May 2023: Year to date passenger numbers have increased by 7% against May 2022

May 2023: Year to date passenger numbers is at 85% of the level we had pre-pandemic in 2019/20.

Statistics for Wick JOG:

Passenger numbers:

Year to date increase of 13.8% against 2022/23

Still significantly down on pre-pandemic levels.

As the PSO enters it's second year we will have better understanding of the passenger profile and the overall performance of the route.

Aircraft movements:

Year to date decrease of 7.5% against 2022/23

Ferry flights have seen a significant increase towards the end of May with many delays caused by weather at the start of the month.

An increase in traffic is normal as we come into the summer months.

Wick John O'Groats Airport

Ceangailte • Connected



Ongoing works

The annual maintenance works have commenced with minor repairs scheduled for the runway and taxiways and a refresh of some of the paint markings.

Projects update

HIAL continues to invest in the airport and to conduct capital projects.

- The surface water drainage system CCTV surveys are complete, and we have received the full reports. The sampling and analysis done by UHI Thurso College, Environmental Research Institute (ERI) to identify any contaminants in the runway water runoff has been completed and we await the final report. Once all the data has been returned HIAL will engage a consultant to advise on next steps.
- Our all-electric baggage truck has been delivered and is in use on the Wick to Aberdeen flights. This is our second all electric vehicle at the airport.
- A new tractor for de-icing and grass cutting activities has been procured from a local supplier and was delivered at the end of March.

Audits and Safety meetings

We continue with our safety meetings and Eastern representatives have attended all the Airport Safety Committee and Local Runway Safety Team meetings since the commencement of the PSO.

A winter washup meeting was held at the start of May with no issues reported by the airport, airline, or other stakeholders.

An internal Tier 3 safety audit by HIAL senior management was carried out during the last week of May.

We have two CAA audits pencilled in for the upcoming year and these are both scheduled for August.

Staffing levels

ATC staffing is currently reduced to three operational ATCO's, one of our ATCO's has returned from long term absence and is undergoing retraining.

The two successful ATC candidates have commenced their initial training courses.



Wick John O'Groats Airport

Ceangailte • Connected

Due to an upcoming retirement from the Airport Fire Service recruitment was carried out in May and interviews will be held during June.

Opening hours

The reduced staffing levels in ATC means the requirement for tactical closures of the airport throughout the day remains in place.

We do not foresee a resolution to this situation for at least 6 months.

Eastern Airways and other stakeholders have been informed of the issues we face and will continue to receive regular updates.

The 24/7 cover for emergency flights remains unchanged.

Wick PSO update for Caithness Transport Forum

Year 2 summary to date

While it is early in the year, passenger figures to date are looking promising, with an average of 878 passengers carried over the course of April and May. Should these averages hold or grow over the course of the year, the service is on track to carry well over 10,000 passengers this year.

Weekend passenger numbers are promising, indicating strong and continued leisure travel demand, and a number of Friday and Sunday services are now operating at or near capacity.

Midweek passenger numbers continue to be limited, indicating a continued lack of demand from business travellers who would usually be expected to drive demand in these periods.

Performance and Reliability

Performance and reliability over the period from March to May 2023 has been acceptable, although slightly below expected, with averages as follows:

- On-time performance (within 15 minutes) – 83%
- Reliability (services planned vs. operated) – 92%

The dip in performance has largely been driven by a poor period of service over the course of May, with a week of poor weather followed by a week with a number of crew and technical issues. This has been discussed and resolved with the operator and the Council has received reassurances that the issues driving this are being resolved and that we will not see a recurrence of this poor period of performance.

Winter schedule

While exact timings have yet to be confirmed – due to the potential for change in other operators’ schedules over the coming months – the Council and operator have agreed in principle to operate a winter schedule which remains in line with that operated over the summer. This will continue to consist of a double daily rotation on weekdays, with a single rotation on Sundays.

Some reduction in service will occur over the Christmas and New Year period as previously, with the current draft schedule in place (subject to confirmation with HIAL):

Sat	Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat	Sun
23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31
1	0	0	0	1	1	1	0	0
Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat	Sun	Mon	
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	
0	1	1	1	1	0	1	2	

Study of price as driver of demand

Following discussions with stakeholders and a successful funding application to Dounreay, over the course of August the PSO service will operate with a special pricing structure to enable the Council to better understand the degree to which price is a driver of demand to the service.

For one month, from 1 to 31 August, all seats on all flights will be available at a flat rate of £49.99. Promotion of this will start towards the end of June and bookings will be available throughout July and August.

The study will measure a range of factors potentially impacted by the provision of all flights at a low, flat rate, including:

- How this affects the market for services between Wick and Aberdeen
 - Change in usage profile – business vs leisure
 - Change in service users – new users vs returning users
 - Change in destination – Aberdeen as final destination vs. onward travel
- How this affects the financial sustainability of the service (number of passengers vs. average revenue per passenger / total revenue over the period)
- Whether this drives any notable changes in booking patterns e.g.
 - Initial spike in demand at outset followed by drop to baseline levels vs. sustained increase in demand over the period
 - Number of short-notice vs. forward bookings compared to baseline levels

The study work will be undertaken over the course of August and September (to understand any potential “long tail” effects), with a report to be produced and delivered in mid-October. This will help the Council to better understand the drivers of demand on the service and to shape any future schedules or options for future delivery of the PSO.



**CAITHNESS TRANSPORT FORUM 22nd June 2023
SCRABSTER HARBOUR UPDATE**

Scrabster Harbour is managed and operated 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

The 2022-23 financial year ended on 31st March 2023. The Trust recorded a particularly strong trading period and would wish to highlight the following.

- Total vessel arrivals were 2,050, down 72 vessels on the previous year.
- Total vessel tonnage amounted to 8.595 million tonnes, an increase of 6% on last year.
- Ferry passenger numbers totalled 163,538, a 41% increase on the previous year and a level greater than the pre-Covid period.
- General cargo volumes amounted to 42,629 tonnes, a small increase on the previous year. The bulk of the general cargo was timber.
- Faroese fish cargo volumes amounted to 15,447 tonnes, a fall of 13% compared to 2021-22. The second service operated by Smyril Line has not called since September 2022.

- Fuel deliveries by coastal tanker amounted to 40,440 tonnes, a level nearly identical to 2021-22.
- Offshore energy activity involved 130 vessels with a registered tonnage of 493,834 tonnes, increases of 109% and 85% respectively on the previous trading period.

2. LOOKING AHEAD & OTHER MATTERS

- There has been a strong start to the new financial year with the ferry, fishing, and general cargo sectors particularly active.
- The persistent north-westerly and westerly winds have made conditions challenging at the commencement of the cruise season. To date there has been three cruise calls bringing 2,680 visitors to the area. The feedback so far has been positive.



- The new Border Target Operating Model was finally published by UK Government in early April. The new model takes a risk-based approach which is welcome but much of the detail regarding the operation of the model is still unavailable. Regardless, the Harbour Trust has reactivated its application to be designated as a Border Control Port.
- The new Scottish rateable valuations came into force on 1st April 2023. The valuation for the Scrabster Harbour undertaking has increased by 89%. This increase is at variance with the position of other ports whose valuations have either increased slightly or even fallen compared with the 2017 valuation exercise. The new valuation has been formally appealed.
- The Trust, the Pentland Floating Wind Project, and the Developing Young Workforce North Highland are sponsoring ten local young people to participate in a sail training experience as part of the Tall Ships race. The individuals will participate in the race leg between Norway and Shetland in July.

6th June 2023



Wick Harbour

Update for Caithness Transport Forum -21st June 2022

Marina

- It has been a steady start to the leisure season with 56 yacht arrivals for 159 yacht days and 118 crew, up to the end of May. June has been a bit slower, nevertheless, we are still seeing throughput on most days. Vessels have been a mix between UK, German, French and Dutch nationalities up to the present. No Scandinavian visitors as yet.

Cargo

- Cargo ships numbers have continued to be low, however the second half of the year is looking much more optimistic and also in to 2024 with several shipments of pipes and on-shore windfarm components due.

Offshore Wind

- Offshore Wind business has now entered the summer maintenance campaign period and Crew Transfer Vessel numbers have increased accordingly, with more expected to arrive over the next two weeks.

Moray West is due to begin construction later this year. As yet it is in known if there will be any spin off for Wick Harbour from that project.

Moray East being supported from Wick harbour with a CTV carrying out annual ROV Surveys of Pile Foundations.

- **Fishing.** Remains to be challenging for the local shellfishery, with product scarce on the ground. Some visiting scallop dredgers landing to the harbour over the past few weeks.

Ian Cormack
Harbour Master
Wick Harbour



Update for Caithness Transport Forum 22 June 2023

We are delighted to have the Pentalina back trading on the Pentland Firth Service as of Tuesday 13 June, after the incident in St Margarets Hope on 29 April.

The investigative phase of the dry dock took longer than anticipated but we are grateful to the teams of Cammel Laird in Birkenhead for completing repairs efficiently and effectively ensuring the vessel could be certified and back in service as soon as possible.

The vessel will operate four return sailings per day from St Margarets Hope until 20 September 2023.

We hope the increase in sailings for the summer season will be benefit customers offering flexibility for day trips on and off the islands as well as longer stays.

As expected, passenger numbers have been lower than hoped on the Pentalinas return to service. The incident, followed by the delays to her subsequent return made providing accurate timelines of her return difficult, all contributing to a lower passenger number on her return last week. We have seen an increase in bookings since she returned to service on 13 June and hope to see a rise in passenger figures in the coming weeks.

We have carried out significant recruitment of seagoing staff in preparation to deploy both vessels since the start of the year.

We have also increased our shoreside teams in Orkney, Caithness and in the West Coast (as support for the Alfred).

Most vacancies have now been filled with the exception of Engine Room Watch Ratings and Stewards for the Pentalina (Summer Season) which we continue to recruit for.

-

MV Alfred is currently operating services on the Ardrossan – Brodick route for Calmac Ferries Ltd. The vessel has been well received by customers on the route and has settled into service and timetable well.

-

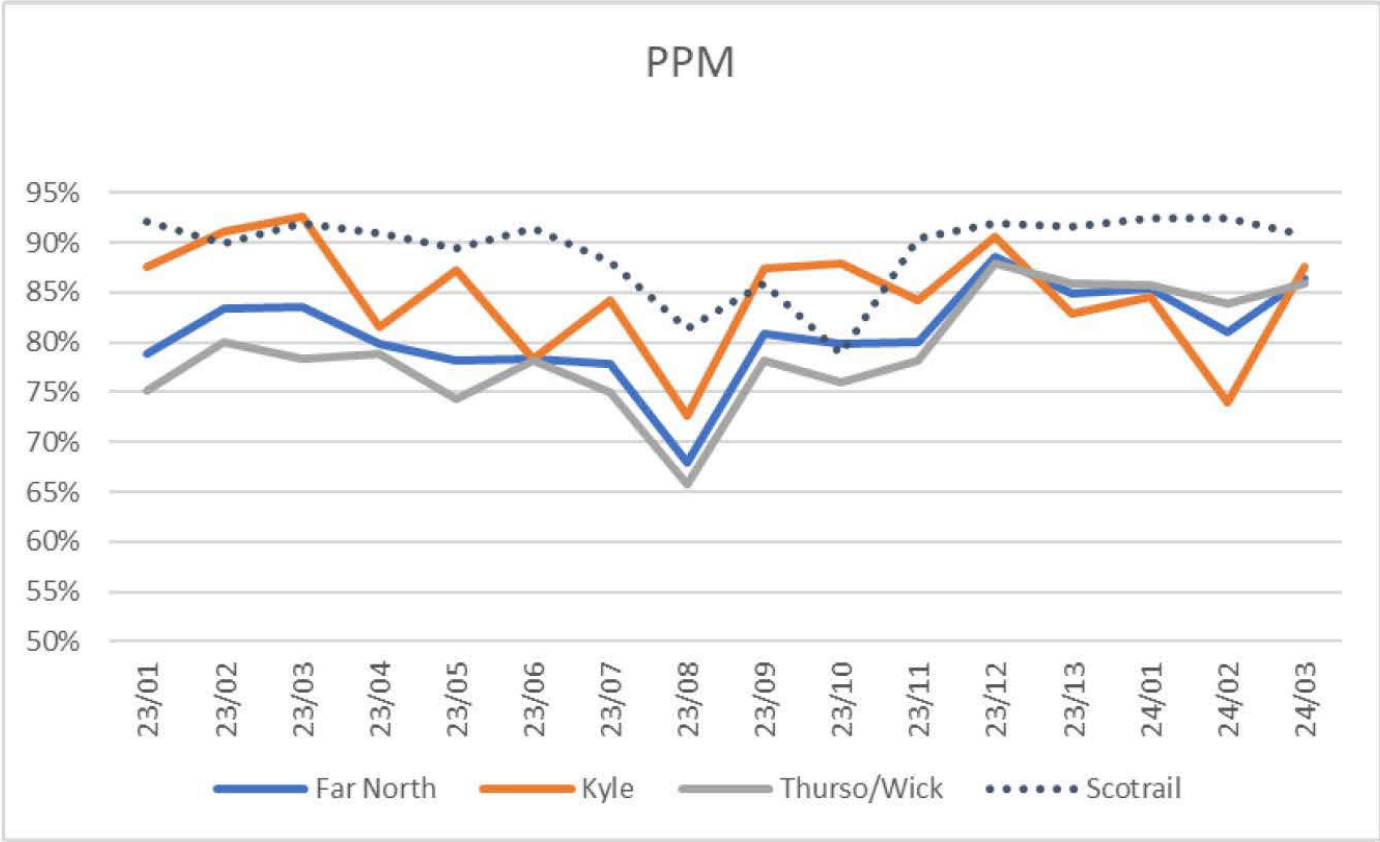
It's been a challenging year for the Pentland Ferries but we are grateful for the support, assistance and unwavering dedication by our own teams and our customers.

We are very much looking forward to the season ahead.

Helen

Far North Performance Updated June 2023

Thurso Wick & Kyle lines



Thurso/Wick							
Period	Booked	Passed PPM		Full Cancellations		Part Cancellations	
23/01	506	380	75%	15	3%	3	1%
23/02	400	320	80%	12	3%	7	2%
23/03	161	126	78%	1	1%	2	1%
23/04	322	254	79%	4	1%	3	1%
23/05	408	303	74%	12	3%	7	2%
23/06	469	367	78%	19	4%	3	1%
23/07	416	312	75%	16	4%	6	1%
23/08	406	267	66%	35	9%	5	1%
23/09	455	356	78%	21	5%	5	1%
23/10	234	178	76%	11	5%	6	3%
23/11	469	367	78%	29	6%	10	2%
23/12	460	404	88%	18	4%	2	0%
23/13	452	388	86%	16	4%	8	2%
24/01	484	415	86%	16	3%	8	2%
24/02	472	396	84%	14	3%	10	2%
24/03 PTD	148	127	86%	7	5%	1	1%
Total	148	127	86%	7	5%	1	1%

Kyle Line							
Period	Booked	Passed PPM		Full Cancellations		Part Cancellations	
23/01	216	189	88%	0	0%	0	0%
23/02	180	164	91%	0	0%	0	0%
23/03	95	88	93%	0	0%	0	0%
23/04	194	158	81%	0	0%	0	0%
23/05	180	157	87%	2	1%	0	0%
23/06	208	163	78%	2	1%	2	1%
23/07	178	150	84%	0	0%	0	0%
23/08	179	130	73%	4	2%	0	0%
23/09	190	166	87%	5	3%	0	0%
23/10	108	95	88%	2	2%	0	0%
23/11	197	166	84%	7	4%	1	1%
23/12	200	181	91%	6	3%	2	1%
23/13	192	159	83%	2	1%	0	0%
24/01	208	176	85%	1	0%	0	0%
24/02	200	148	74%	3	2%	0	0%
24/03 PTD	64	56	88%	0	0%	0	0%
Total	64	56	88%	0	0%	0	0%

Kyle Line Performance

PPM failures Kyle Line				
Rsp Period	NETWORK RAIL	SCOTRAIL	TOC ON TOC	TOTAL
23/01	18.1	7.5	0.0	25.6
23/02	8.6	5.6	0.0	14.2
23/03	4.3	2.4	0.0	6.6
23/04	20.1	9.6	0.0	29.8
23/05	11.8	8.6	0.0	20.4
23/06	28.1	11.4	0.0	39.5
23/07	16.5	10.8	0.4	27.7
23/08	20.7	27.2	0.0	47.9
23/09	13.7	9.3	0.0	23.0
23/10	7.8	5.2	0.0	13.0
23/11	21.3	9.6	0.0	31.0
23/12	16.2	2.8	0.0	19.0
23/13	22.2	6.5	0.0	28.7
24/01	10.4	15.2	1.0	26.6
24/02	19.5	23.1	0.0	42.7
24/03 PTD	2.6	4.4	0.0	7.0

PPM failures Kyle Line %			
Rsp Period	NETWORK RAIL	SCOTRAIL	TOC ON TOC
23/01	70.7%	29.3%	0.0%
23/02	60.8%	39.2%	0.0%
23/03	64.5%	35.5%	0.0%
23/04	67.7%	32.3%	0.0%
23/05	57.9%	42.1%	0.0%
23/06	71.2%	28.8%	0.0%
23/07	59.5%	39.0%	1.5%
23/08	43.2%	56.8%	0.0%
23/09	59.4%	40.6%	0.0%
23/10	59.8%	40.2%	0.0%
23/11	68.9%	31.1%	0.0%
23/12	85.2%	14.8%	0.0%
23/13	77.4%	22.6%	0.0%
24/01	39.1%	57.1%	3.8%
24/02	45.8%	54.2%	0.0%
24/03 PTD	37.6%	62.4%	0.0%

PPM Failures spit by directorate for Kyle Line																	
RESPONSIBILITY	23/01	23/02	23/03	23/04	23/05	23/06	23/07	23/08	23/09	23/10	23/11	23/12	23/13	24/01	24/02	24/03	Total
ADHESION	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	21	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	25
CUST EXP	1	0	0	1	0	3	1	1	0	1	0	0	0	1	3	0	13
EXTERNAL	0	2	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	4	0	10
FLEET	5	2	1	6	8	7	4	5	7	3	2	2	4	11	14	1	82
NETWORK RAIL	18	9	4	20	12	28	16	21	14	8	21	16	22	10	20	3	242
OPS	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	2	5
TRAINCREW	1	1	1	0	1	1	3	0	1	1	7	0	3	2	2	1	25

Thurso/Wick Line Performance

PPM Failures Thurso/Wick Line				
Rsp Period	NETWORK RAIL	SCOTRAIL	TOC ON TOC	Total
23/01	63.3	43.5	0.5	107.4
23/02	46.1	18.8	0.0	64.8
23/03	8.2	19.2	0.0	27.4
23/04	32.2	22.2	0.0	54.4
23/05	52.4	36.0	0.0	88.4
23/06	56.6	28.1	0.7	85.4
23/07	58.8	34.1	0.0	92.8
23/08	50.7	69.5	0.0	120.1
23/09	52.9	31.1	0.0	84.1
23/10	30.2	19.6	0.0	49.8
23/11	49.9	44.4	0.0	94.2
23/12	36.5	14.4	0.0	50.9
23/13	26.2	29.6	0.3	56.1
24/01	19.1	42.8	0.0	61.8
24/02	25.8	39.7	0.0	65.5
24/03 PTD	5.8	11.6	0.0	17.5

PPM Failures Thurso/Wick Line %			
Rsp Period	NETWORK RAIL	SCOTRAIL	TOC ON TOC
23/01	59.0%	40.5%	0.5%
23/02	71.1%	28.9%	0.0%
23/03	29.9%	70.1%	0.0%
23/04	59.1%	40.9%	0.0%
23/05	59.3%	40.7%	0.0%
23/06	66.4%	32.9%	0.8%
23/07	63.3%	36.7%	0.0%
23/08	42.2%	57.8%	0.0%
23/09	63.0%	37.0%	0.0%
23/10	60.6%	39.4%	0.0%
23/11	52.9%	47.1%	0.0%
23/12	71.7%	28.3%	0.0%
23/13	46.7%	52.8%	0.6%
24/01	30.9%	69.1%	0.0%
24/02	39.4%	60.6%	0.0%
24/03 PTD	33.4%	66.6%	0.0%

PPM Failures spit by directorate for Thurso/Wick Line																	
Responsibility	23/01	23/02	23/03	23/04	23/05	23/06	23/07	23/08	23/09	23/10	23/11	23/12	23/13	24/01	24/02	24/03	TOTAL
ADHESION	0	0	0	0	0	0	7	39	5	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	50
CUST EXP	1	2	2	1	8	2	3	0	0	1	1	1	0	0	0	1	23
EXTERNAL	1	3	2	2	1	2	0	5	3	0	6	0	0	2	5	2	34
FLEET	35	9	8	16	14	13	14	25	16	15	24	9	22	38	29	9	296
NETWORK RAIL	63	46	8	32	52	57	59	51	53	30	50	36	26	19	26	6	614
OPS	0	0	3	0	0	6	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	10
TRAINCREW	7	5	5	4	13	5	10	2	7	4	13	4	8	1	6	0	94

Caithness Transport Forum 15

June 2023 update

Trunk Road work programme north of Inverness

Financial Year	Route	Location	Work Description	Traffic Management Type	Highland Council Area	Start	Duration	Day/ Nigh	status
2023/24	A9	A9 Allangrange to Tore NB Duals	Inlay	Convoy	Black Isle	12-Mar-23	16d	Nightshift	complete
2023/24	A9	Latheronwheel Review	Signing and road markings	Temporary Traffic Signals	East Caithness	21-Mar-23	10d	Dayshift	complete
2023/24	A9	Helmsdale Footway	Footway improvements	Temporary Traffic Signals	East Sutherland	27-Mar-23	30d	Dayshift	ongoing
2023/24	A9	A9 Ousdale	Inlay	Convoy	East Caithness	24-Apr-23	4d	Dayshift	complete
2023/24	A9	A9 Geiselittle	Inlay	Convoy	North West Caithness	02-May-23	1d	Dayshift	complete
2023/24	A9	A9 Cambusavie Bends	Inlay	Closure with timed amnesties	East Sutherland	09-May-23	5d	Nightshift	complete
2023/24	A9	A9 Berriedale	Inlay	Closure with timed amnesties	East Caithness	15-May-23	3d	Nightshift	complete
2023/24	A9	A9 Deephaven	Inlay	Convoy	Cromarty Firth	11-Jun-23	11d	Nightshift	on site
2023/24	A99	Hempriggs Gatehouse Footway	Installation of kerbing	Temporary Traffic Signals	East Caithness	12-Jun-23	5d	Dayshift	ongoing
2023/24	A9	A9 South of The Mound	Inlay	Convoy	East Sutherland	26-Jun-23	6d	Dayshift	programmed
2023/24	A9	A9 North of Struie	Inlay	Convoy then Closure with diversion	Cromarty Firth	26-Jun-23	20d	Nightshift	programmed
2023/24	A9	A9 B9169 junction Black Isle	Inlay	Convoy	Black Isle	06-Aug-23	2d	Nightshift	programmed
2023/24	A9	Thurso Signing	Signing improvements	Temporary Traffic Signals	North West Caithness	07-Aug-23	10d	Dayshift	programmed
2023/24	A9	A9 North of Glenmorangie	Inlay	Convoy	Easter Ross	08-Aug-23	3d	Nightshift	programmed
2023/24	A9	A9 North End of Helmsdale	Inlay	Closure with timed amnesties	East Sutherland	late Aug	6d	Nightshift	programmed
2023/24	A9	A9 North of Portgower	Inlay	Closure with timed amnesties	East Sutherland	late Aug	2d	Nightshift	programmed
2023/24	A9	A9 North of Hilliclay	Inlay	Convoy	North West Caithness	September	6d	Dayshift	waiting for Scottish Water works
2023/24	A9	A9 Achalone	Inlay	Convoy	East Caithness	September	7d	Dayshift	waiting for Scottish Water works
2023/24	A9	A9 Alness to Tomich	Inlay	Convoy	Cromarty Firth	31-Oct-23	12d	Nightshift	planned
2023/24	A9	A9 south of Munloch junction	Inlay	Convoy	Black Isle	12-Nov-23	10d	Nightshift	planned

2023/2024 Priority	Activity	Route	Road Name	General Description	Average Road Width (m)	Scheme Length (m)	Total Area (m²)	cost per m²	Estimated Cost to Lay	Status
311	Overlay	B870/	Quaybrae to Ruthers junction		3	1200	3600	£17	£61,200.00	
312	Overlay	B870	Quaybrae junction past Scotlag		3	600	1800	£17	£30,600.00	
313	Overlay	U2460	Newfield road		3	400	1200	£17	£20,400.00	
314	Overlay	C1029	Camster Road Pennyland House		3	710	2130	£17	£36,210.00	
315	Overlay	C1029	Camster Road Strath to windfarm		3	4500	13500	£17	£229,500.00	
316	Overlay	C1029	Camster Road at Windfarm entrance		3	700	2100	£17	£35,700.00	
317	Overlay	C1029	Camster Road		3	700	2100	£17	£35,700.00	
318	Inlay	U3532	Green Road		6	200	1200	£20	£24,000.00	
319	Inlay	C1045	Kaithers crooked village road		6	300	1800	£20	£36,000.00	
320	Inlay	U1071	Lybster main st		6	400	2400	£20	£48,000.00	
321	Inlay	U3494	St fergus road		6	220	1320	£20	£26,400.00	
322	Inlay	A836	Castletown Road		6	204	1224	20	£24,480.00	
323	Inlay	B874	Orrnie Road		7.5	20	150	20	£3,000.00	
324	Inlay	A99	A99 North St - B874 Jct		5.4	380	2052	20	£41,040.00	
325	Inlay	A836	A836 Castletown to Dunnet		7.5	280	2100	20	£42,000.00	
326	Inlay	A836	A836 Castletown to Dunnet		7.5	70	525	20	£10,500.00	
327	Overlay	U1043	Dunbeath - Mulbuie Road		3.5	300	1050	17	£17,850.00	



Stagecoach Update

- The network changes we implemented following the tender changes have settled in.
- From August we will be making a change to provide a link from Scrabster to Thurso high for fare paying pupils to get to and from School.
- We are starting to see that passenger numbers are starting to increase especially the 82 service and Castletown passengers are taking advantage of the longer 80 service which now terminates in Wick

Kim Shaw, Directors PA

Stagecoach North Scotland

Press Release - A Community Rail Partnership for the Far North Line

After more than three years of preparatory work, a voluntary committee has been successful in its application to the Scottish Government to have the Caithness and Sutherland section of the Far North Line (FNL) designated as the 9th Community Rail Partnership (CRP) route in Scotland. The announcement was made by the Scottish Transport Minister, Kevin Stewart MSP, at an event to celebrate community rail across Scotland held in the Scottish Parliament on Wednesday the 24th of May.

This designation should bring real benefits to the local communities along the line and also create opportunities to promote the line, its communities, and the attractions that it connects. CRP status provides an opportunity for greater community involvement in planning, development and operation of the line. The main aims will be to increase passenger footfall in local communities, promote social inclusion, increase the use of sustainable travel, and bring about improvements to the stations and services of the line, hopefully growing passenger numbers.

The FNL CRP will help communities to develop and deliver community projects, events, and activities that will encourage visitors to slow down and enjoy our amazing villages and settlements, creating economic opportunities as well as moving people away from the tourism hot spots and the speed of the NC500. This will be done by recruiting and coordinating a group of active volunteers in each community which in turn will offer opportunities for our local businesses which are essential to the sustainability of our fragile communities and crucial in our aims to reverse depopulation and create younger, more dynamic communities in the future.

The added benefit, and another crucial aim, is that through promoting sustainable travel by developing low carbon transport initiatives (including promoting cycling and walking opportunities that start and finish in our local communities) as well as encouraging people to use the train, we will help our climate challenge aims and reduce emissions, helping to move towards the goal of Net Zero.

Scottish Minister of Transport, Kevin Stewart MSP said *"Community Rail Partnerships are the embodiment of very passionate and dedicated people who volunteer on our railways. The work they do improves stations and lines across the country, bringing together communities, and giving greater local buy in to Scotland's Railway. That is why I am delighted to approve and welcome the new Far North Line Community Rail Partnership."*

David Watson, Kyle of Sutherland Development Trust Manager and FNL CRP Chair, explains: *"The Far North Line is a world class but underperforming asset. The journey itself is an amazing experience with an incredible variety of natural and cultural assets along its length. Although it is restricted by its engineering it presents an amazing opportunity to help sustain the communities that it serves. The CRP will form a link between the railway and local communities, bringing together a range of stakeholders, including local businesses and services, along the rail corridor to develop and promote the line, the local communities, and its attractions."*

It is also hoped that the Partnership can boost tourism and make the rail service more responsive to local needs. There is renewed interest in sustainable transport not just between train and bus but through use of other transport resources such as e-bikes, and community transport schemes. Michael Willmot, Director of Helmsdale Station CIC and CRP secretary says: *"recognising there has been growing concern about the number of cars and motorhomes that have been attracted by the success of the North Coast 500 promotion, this CRP should help to develop alternatives to private vehicles for exploring the North Highlands Region as well as providing improved public transport for local communities. There are amazing opportunities for visitors to slow down and immerse themselves in the unique culture of Caithness and Sutherland."*

In delivering its ambitions, the Far North Line CRP will work in partnership with ScotRail, the local rail user group - the Friends of the Far North Line, and representatives of communities and tourism organisations along the route. David Simpson, ScotRail Service Delivery Director, said: *"I wholeheartedly welcome the establishment of the Far North Line Community Rail Partnership. "We look forward to the journey ahead and the positive impact that the CRP will undoubtedly bring in enhancing the route's potential as a vital lifeline and catalyst for economic growth throughout Caithness and Sutherland."*

The current members of the management group include a number of experienced community development professionals with a track record of raising external funding and delivering successful community projects. The group also has representation from Venture North (the Destination Management Group for Caithness & Sutherland) and the North Highland Climate Hub, to ensure that we are truly promoting sustainable tourism development with environmentally responsible projects to help the future of the communities of Caithness and Sutherland for years to come.

If you are interested in receiving further information or in joining the CRP Management Group, please contact Michael Willmot at helmsdalestation@gmail.com

Notes for Editors

Attached photos

Photo 1 Far North Line CRP secretary, Michael Willmot and Chair, David Watson with Transport Minister, Kevin Stewart after the announcement of the CRP's designation. Photo credit: Iona Shepherd

Phot 2; A Far North Line scene north of Kinbrace. Photo credit: Gray's School of Art

Phot 3 Trains passing at Helmsdale. Photo credit: Gray's School of Art

Enquiries and further information from

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Ranald Robertson, Partnership Director

**The Highlands and Islands Transport Partnership (HITRANS)
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HITRANS Regional Transport Strategy - Case for Change Consultation

Date: 08/05/2023 **Our ref:** TM/CTF/2023/HT-01

Dear Mr Robertson,

I am writing to you today in my capacity as both Chair of the Caithness Transport Forum (CTF) and Chief Executive of Caithness Chamber of Commerce to provide comments on the HITRANS Regional Transport Strategy - Case for Change Consultation. Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback on the consultation regarding improving transport in the region.

The consultation must be cognisant that "one size does not fit all" when delivering a transport strategy, particularly with aims to reduce inequality and deliver inclusive economic growth. We agree undoubtedly that everyone living and visiting the Highlands should have fair access to affordable, healthy and sustainable transportation choices, which equitably serve all users. However, prioritisation and provision of sustainable transport needs of rural communities must be at the forefront of decision making, particularly when our region has suffered from sustained connectivity difficulties, reduction and lack of investment in development of services. Transportation and connectivity are key factors in mitigating the risk of depopulation, and in turn the sustainability of our region.

The CTF brings together local transport stakeholders and operators to promote a strong, inter-connected road, rail, sea and air transport network to, from and within the region for economic, social and environmental benefit. We strongly believe with our population size and dispersion, diverse economic landscape and key locational factors the North Highlands is ideally placed to be a test environment for transport pilot activities needed to reach a 'Just Transition' across Scotland, such as Demand Responsive Transport and Community Transport Services as recommended by STPR2.

We would like to make some specific comments with regards the report below to highlight how 'one size does not fit all' which will hopefully help to contextualise what it means in our part of the Highlands and Islands so that the strategy can truly represent the region:

2.4.11 Commuting – we would echo the comments that businesses struggle to fill posts and retain staff due to the dispersed nature of the population and the lack of transport options. This is a particular issue for tourism businesses and the lower paid service industries such as the care sector.

2.4.17 Health Care – residents of the North Highlands are heavily reliant on accessing many healthcare services in Inverness. With current service provision forcing many labouring mothers to make the 110-mile journey to Inverness, in 2022 only 8 women gave birth in Caithness, against 202 who travelled from the county to Raigmore. This is one example highlighting the extreme reliance on the lifeline A9 road and the reliance on private cars as a means of transport. There is also the issue of cost.

4.4 Active Travel – Caithness transportation is prominently made up of car usage. Data clearly highlights 87% of residents of Wick and 84% of residents of Thurso have access to one car or more. In many cases this is driven by necessity, a factor of poor connectivity and transport infrastructure both within and travelling from the area. Reliability and lack of interconnected travel services from rural locations means many journeys can only be made using private transport - i.e., car. Whilst achieving a shift from car-based travel to active travel modes is fundamental to national policy, this does not take into consideration the physical, environmental, locational factors in which rural communities live. Weather conditions, distances between settlements and urban centres, lack of cycle infrastructure, unsafe and increasingly poor road and pavement conditions are all barriers to active travel. In our region future transport investment cannot be defined by the order of the four priorities in the 'Prioritising Sustainable Transport' NTS2 hierarchy depicted in 3.2.

4.5 Bus & Coach – public bus services in the Highland Council area are predominantly reliant on and underpinned by Dounreay and Highland Council contracts. When these change, quite often this negatively impacts on connectivity, as recently happened in the latest school contract awards in December 2022 when some services were reduced. Out with towns and larger settlements accessibility is poor across the region. Extremely poor road conditions in the North Highlands area have also led to withdrawal of some privately operated public bus services, due to vehicle damage and safety concerns.

Limited bus service times connecting the North Highlands with the Highland Capital of Inverness for many essential services including healthcare, mean there is frequently inadequate time to carry out the intended activity of the journey, resulting in costly overnight stays or inevitably personal car usage for the journey.

Improved bus provision has the potential to support an integrated demand responsive and sustainable transport solution for the region, providing fair access to services.

4.6 Rail – The Far North Line plays a vital role in connecting isolated locations and as such the HITRANS Regional Transport Strategy should take into consideration the outputs of the Far North Line Review Group established by Fergus Ewing MSP and make sure these recommendations are funded and expedited to drive improvements.

The Far North line suffers from inequitable service with regards to catering provisions. Currently the service obligation meets the needs of passengers only 6 months of the year, meaning during the coldest and often most weather-distributive winter months there is no access to hot water or catering for passengers on journeys which can take over 4 hours each way. As we are collectively urged to reduce our reliance on road vehicles, customer service onboard public transport services in rural locations must match the expectations of those elsewhere in the country.

4.7 Ferry – The HITRANS Regional Transport Strategy report does not note impacts of the delay to the roll out of RET across the Northern Isles Ferry Services, initially set to be

implemented in June 2018. Communities of the North Highlands and Islands served by the Northern Isles Ferry Services routes have suffered because of inequitable treatment with regards to ferry fares. Whilst island and neighbouring mainland communities with RET in place have benefited from the economic advantages, the far north has been left behind.

4.9 Road – The HITRANS Regional Transport Strategy report does not note the impacts of poor road maintenance and deteriorating road conditions. Caithness and Sutherland roads are maintained by the local authority and have suffered from severe under investment over a long period of time resulting in severely degraded road surfaces and innumerable potholes, increasing journey times and raising severe safety concerns. Whilst the Highland Council has recognised the issue and has committed extra funds, the task of bringing roads back to an acceptable standard cannot be achieved quickly and will take several years and requires an increased funding commitment year on year.

As highlighted in 4.5 above, poor road conditions have already resulted in a local bus provider removing services due to the damage caused to their vehicles. Poor road conditions also reduce the attractiveness of the area from a visitor and investor perspective. In addition there are increased safety concerns as drivers manoeuvre, sometimes unsafely, to avoid potholes and damage to their vehicles.

4.10 Aviation - the information provided in the document on aviation is inaccurate and out of date. Wick John O'Groats Airport is supported by a Public Service Obligation (PSO). The PSO is set to be in place for three years and started in April 2022. The airline operator is Eastern Airways. Although data provided in the report highlights Inverness Airport as the key regional hub for travel, Wick John O'Groats Airport remains an essential component in the overall transport connectivity to and from the North Highland region. The service encompasses business, leisure and essential lifeline travel needs for people in the North Highlands and has a vital role in the economic sustainability and continued regeneration of the region, making the North Highlands substantially more accessible and in turn attracting skilled workers and encouraging businesses to invest and expand in the region. Accessibility provided by the service also plays a key role in the development of the regions flourishing tourism sector.

Net zero and sustainability were at the heart of the PSO business case and is supportive of the Scottish Government's commitment to the Highlands and Islands becoming a net-zero aviation region by 2040.

The document does not make reference to the Orkney-based Sustainable Aviation Test Environment (SATE) led by Highlands and Islands Airports Ltd. The project has created the UK's first low-carbon aviation test centre embedded at a commercial airport, launched in November 2020. SATE aims to demonstrate the next generation of air services and how they can be deployed within a regional aviation system, providing real solutions for the Highlands and Islands region. Providing the blueprint for net zero regional aviation, the SATE project has seen pioneering sustainable aviation technology demonstration flights delivered, including:

- a successful collaboration between drone specialist technology firm Windracers with Royal Mail on autonomous flights
- demonstrations of Flare Bright's parcel-sized gliding drone system
- the first hybrid electric flights for Scotland pioneered by Ampaire

As you can see, transport connectivity is a vital component to the region's development and sustainability.

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economic growth and lead the low carbon economy. On 8 February 2023 it held its augural conference in Thurso to launch its new brand and revised masterplan. The event explored economic opportunities in the North Highlands and was attended by key private and public sector stakeholders with speakers from education and the offshore wind, space, tourism and hospitality, natural capital and nuclear industries.

At the conference 98% of conference attendees believed improved transport connectivity was important to the region's attractiveness and 87% of conference attendees believed regional transportation was a significant risk to the region see <https://www.focusnorth.scot/wp-content/uploads/Focus-North-Opening-Presentation.pdf>

I hope considerations will be made to the above comments and the details provided will be helpful in formulating a local transport strategy for our region. In my capacity as Chair of the Caithness Transport Forum, I would be happy to extend further assistance by way of meeting to discuss the opportunity for the North Highlands to lead on transport pilot projects and update HITRANS on the work of the Transport Forum and that of Focus North.

Yours sincerely,

Trudy Morris
Chief Executive/Chair CTF

Ranald Robertson, Partnership Director

The Highlands and Islands Transport Partnership (HITRANS)
2nd Floor, Rear 7 Ardross Terrace
Inverness
IV3 5NQ



The Highland Council Local Transport Strategy - Case for Change Consultation

Date: 24/05/2023 **Our ref:** TM/CTF/2023/HC-01

Dear Ranald,

I am writing to you today in my capacity as both Chair of the Caithness Transport Forum (CTF) and Chief Executive of Caithness Chamber of Commerce to provide comments on the Highland Council Local Transport Strategy - Case for Change Consultation. Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback on the consultation regarding improving transport in the region.

The consultation must be cognisant that “one size does not fit all” when delivering a transport strategy, particularly with aims to reduce inequality and deliver inclusive economic growth. We agree undoubtedly that everyone living and visiting the Highlands should have fair access to affordable, healthy and sustainable transportation choices, which equitably serve all users. However, prioritisation and provision of sustainable transport needs of rural communities must be at the forefront of decision-making, particularly when our region has suffered from sustained connectivity difficulties, reduction, and lack of investment in the development of services. Transportation and connectivity are key factors in mitigating the risk of depopulation, and in turn the sustainability of our region.

The CTF brings together local transport stakeholders and operators to promote a strong, inter-connected road, rail, sea and air transport network to, from and within the region for economic, social and environmental benefit. We strongly believe with our population size and dispersion, diverse economic landscape and key locational factors the North Highlands is ideally placed to be a test environment for transport pilot activities needed to reach a ‘Just

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Transition' across Scotland, such as Demand Responsive Transport and Community Transport Services as recommended by STPR2.

We would like to make some specific comments with regards to the report below to highlight how 'one size does not fit all' which will hopefully help to contextualise what it means in our area of the Highlands and Islands so that the strategy can truly represent the region:

Demographics, Travel Patterns and Climate Breakdown

We strongly agree the report clearly illustrates the need to support transport needs of rural communities. Although the report highlights significant potential for carbon reduction through the modal shift of transportation usage from outlying settlements into Inverness, as the dominant area of employment for the wider highland region, the HITRANS case for change report identified prominent commuter areas within localised conflict areas such as settlement outlying Wick and Thurso. We must ensure rural communities are not left behind in investment decisions made with a weighted balance towards return on investment. Transport infrastructure within rural communities has long suffered due to lack of investment and with little alternative other than forced car ownership, communities particularly marginalised members of society are left behind and unfairly disadvantaged. Rural areas already suffer significantly higher fuel, food and general living costs, investment in adequate and sustainable transport is needed in order to level up access.

Equalities & Public Health

The report correctly illustrates, according to the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation that 65% of the Highland population live in an area where access to transport is scored 4 or less. Caithness transportation is prominently made up of car usage. Data clearly highlights 87% of residents of Wick and 84% of residents of Thurso have access to one car or more. In many cases this is driven by necessity, a factor of poor connectivity and transport infrastructure both within and travelling from the area. Reliability and lack of interconnected travel services from rural locations mean many journeys can only be made using private transport - i.e., car.

Health Care – residents of the North Highlands are heavily reliant on accessing many healthcare services in Inverness. With current service provision forcing many labouring mothers to make the 110-mile journey to Inverness, in 2022 only 8 women gave birth in Caithness, against 202 who travelled from the county to Raigmore. This is one example highlighting the extreme reliance on the lifeline A9 road and the reliance on private cars as a means of transport. There is also the issue of cost.

Commuting – we would echo the comments that businesses struggle to fill posts and retain staff due to the dispersed nature of the population and the lack of transport options. This is a particular issue for tourism businesses and the lower-paid service industries such as the care sector.

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Walking Wheeling and Cycling

Whilst achieving a shift from car-based travel to active travel modes is fundamental to national policy, this does not take into consideration the physical, environmental, and locational factors in which rural communities live. Distances between settlements and urban centres, lack of cycle infrastructure, unsafe and increasingly poor road and pavement conditions, adverse weather conditions and limited hours of light during dark winters, with limited rural street light infrastructure, are all barriers to active travel.

Public Transport

Bus & Coach – public bus services in the Caithness region of the Highland Council area are predominantly reliant on and underpinned by Dounreay and Highland Council contracts. When these change, quite often this negatively impacts connectivity, as recently happened in the latest school contract awards in December 2022 when some services were reduced. Out with towns and larger settlements, accessibility is poor across the region. Extremely poor road conditions in the North Highlands area have also led to the withdrawal of some privately operated public bus services, due to vehicle damage and safety concerns.

Supporting infrastructure in the region is poor and services do not support onward active travel options.

Limited bus service times connecting the North Highlands with the Highland Capital of Inverness for many essential services including healthcare, mean there is frequently inadequate time to carry out the intended activity of the journey, resulting in costly overnight stays or inevitably personal car usage for the journey.

Improved bus provision has the potential to support an integrated demand-responsive and sustainable transport solution for the region, providing fair access to services.

Rail – The Far North Line plays a vital role in connecting isolated locations and as such the HITRANS Regional Transport Strategy should take into consideration the outputs of the Far North Line Review Group established by Fergus Ewing MSP and make sure these recommendations are funded and expedited to drive improvements.

The Far North line suffers from inequitable service with regard to catering provisions. Currently, the service obligation meets the needs of passengers only 6 months of the year, meaning during the coldest and often most weather-distributive winter months there is no access to hot water or catering for passengers on journeys which can take over 4 hours each way. As we are collectively urged to reduce our reliance on-road vehicles, customer service onboard public transport services in rural locations must match the expectations of those elsewhere in the country.

Ports Harbours Aviation, Industry, and the Economy

We are in agreement better integration of transport modes across the network is essential, including both ferry link and aviation services.

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- a successful collaboration between drone specialist technology firm Windracers with Royal Mail on autonomous flights
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Ferry – The region faces significant and unresolved delays to the rollout of RET across the Northern Isles Ferry Services, initially set to be implemented in June 2018. Communities of the North Highlands and Islands served by the Northern Isles Ferry Services routes have suffered because of inequitable treatment with regard to ferry fares. Whilst island and neighbouring mainland communities with RET in place have benefited from the economic advantages, the far north has been left behind.

Connectivity between public transport services is a major factor in the promotion of sustainable low-carbon transport alternatives. Connections between bus, rail, aviation and ferry services are not in sync with transport demands.

Cars & Roads - As highlighted above, Caithness transportation is prominently made up of car usage, roads and the road network will continue to be a vital and significant component in the north highland transportation network, particularly for rural communities who are forced into car ownership due to insufficient public transport provision.

The North Highland region suffers from the impacts of poor road maintenance and deteriorating road conditions. Caithness and Sutherland roads, maintained by the Highland

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Council have suffered from severe under-investment over a long period of time resulting in severely degraded road surfaces and innumerable potholes, increasing journey times and raising severe safety concerns. Whilst the Highland Council has recognised the issue and has committed extra funds, the task of bringing roads back to an acceptable standard cannot be achieved quickly and will take several years and requires an increased funding commitment year on year.

As highlighted in the above, poor road conditions have already resulted in a local bus provider removing services due to the damage caused to their vehicles. Poor road conditions also reduce the attractiveness of the area from a visitor and investor perspective. In addition, there are increased safety concerns as drivers manoeuvre, sometimes unsafely, to avoid potholes and damage to their vehicles.

We support the key finding that in line with National Transport Strategy 2's Investment Hierarchy, efforts need to be made to protect and increase commitment to roads.

As you can see, transport connectivity is a vital component to the region's development and sustainability.

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I hope considerations will be made to the above comments and the details provided will be helpful in formulating a local transport strategy for our region. In my capacity as Chair of the Caithness Transport Forum, I would be happy to extend further assistance by way of meeting to discuss the opportunity for the North Highlands to lead transport pilot projects and update HITRANS on the work of the Transport Forum and that of Focus North.

Yours sincerely,

Trudy Morris

Chief Executive/Chair CTF

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