



# Minutes of the Caithness Transport Forum

Date: 8<sup>th</sup> November 2023

Time: 10:00 – 12:00

Location: Pentland Hotel, Thurso / Microsoft Teams

Present:

Trudy Morris (Chair)	Caithness Chamber of Commerce	In-person
Laura O'Kane	Caithness Chamber of Commerce	In-person
Kris Bevan	NorthLink Ferries	Virtual
Ian Budd	Friends of the Far North Line	Virtual
Laura Carpenter	The Highland Council	Virtual
Dougie Cook	Highlands and Islands Airports Ltd	In-person
John Deighan	Thurso and Wick Trades Union Council	In-person
Bryan Dodds	CVG	In-person
Beatrice Farmer	Dunnet & Canisbay Community Council	In-person
Jonathan Gunn	The Highland Council	In-person
CLlr Ron Gunn	The Highland Council	In Person
Colin Johnstone	Thurso Community Council	In-person
CLlr Willie MacKay	The Highland Council	In-person
Sandy Mackie	Scrabster Harbour Trust	In-person
Bert Macleod	Thurso Community Council	In-person
Wayne Malcolm	Stagecoach North Scotland	In-person
CLlr Janet McEwan	The Highland Council	Virtual
Malcolm MacLeod	The Highland Council	
CLlr Matthew Reiss	The Highland Council	In-person
Ryan Savage	ScotRail	Virtual
Kathryn Scollie	Pentland Ferries	Virtual
David Swanson	The Highland Council	In-person
Michael Wilmott	Far North Line Community Rail Partnership	Virtual

## 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 Raymond Bremner	The Highland Council
Marco Bardelli	Transport Scotland
Fiona Campbell	ScotRail
Ian Cormack	Wick Harbour
Peter Faccenda	Focus North
Janice Miller	Dounreay Travel Office, NRS Dounreay
David Summers	Highland Council

- 1.3. During the meeting the connection was temperamental for those attending via Teams and not all virtual attendees were present for the entire meeting.
- 1.4. In addition, there were issues with the sound quality.

## 2. Minutes of last CTF meeting 22.06.23 - CTF(2023)M002

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

## 3. Review of actions from the last meeting

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

The Chair expressed disappointment that a representative from the Ferries Directorate was unable to attend the meeting. An update has been provided and circulated. **(Appendix A)**

The Chair said the CTF would continue to pursue the issue of the delay to the rollout of the RET on Northern Isles Ferry services. - **ONGOING**

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

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

The meeting was planned to take place in Helmsdale on 23.11.23 - **ONGOING**

**CTF2023 M002/A004:** The Chair to follow up with a request for an update on the enquiry submitted to Alex Hynes regarding funding for Delmore Loop REF TM/CTF/2023/AH01. Response received 01.08.23 **(Appendix B)**

The Chair commented that the CTF would continue to pursue the issue. - **COMPLETE**

**CTF2023 M002/A004:** Dougie Cook to extend an 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 was to steer strategic priorities to ensure safe and regulatory-compliant airports while completing the process for a permanent successor. Unfortunately, during this brief period of transition for HIAL, Stewart would not be able to accept the invitation. However, He would ensure that the invite was passed to the Managing Director when the permanent appointment was made.

The Chair noted she had met with Stewart Adams, Interim Managing Director HIAL and Alastair Gleave, Chief Commercial Officer HIAL to discuss the airport and the PSO.- **COMPLETE**

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

**David Swanson updated 17.08.23** 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.

Regarding reliability in general, the service was subject to a period of poor performance/reliability across May and June 2023. The Highland Council worked closely with Eastern Airways and stakeholders to understand the reasons for this and to implement a plan to return reliability to acceptable levels. This proved to be successful and indications from July/August 2023 were that performance and reliability had returned to expected levels. - **COMPLETE**

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

**Dougie Cook updated on 14.08.23** that HIAL was funded by the Scottish Government using a subsidy. The subsidy fell under specific legislation to enable critical air connectivity for more remote communities that would otherwise be commercially unviable.

Because of the subsidy legislation, HIAL was not permitted to offer further subsidies in the form of discounted fees and charges. If HIAL were to offer further subsidies, then it would breach the provisions of the Subsidy Control Act. - **COMPLETE**

**CTF2023 M002/A007:** Cllr Willie Mackay to follow up with contact details of the 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 updated 17.07.23** Contract workmen were currently white lining and repainting the Disabled areas and filling in potholes in the area between Superdrug and B and M.

The other potholes off the A99 towards Lidl had been marked with white paint in preparation for filling in. - **COMPLETE**

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

**Cllr Willie Mackay updated 12.07.23** The Thurso car park was Highland Council owned and the maintenance responsibility remained with Highland Council, the managing service was listed as

Communities and Place – General Fund. Highland Council Roads Department had been asked to quote for repairing the car park but have declined due to capacity and commitment to spend all of the Capital Budget for the year.

Cllr Willie Mackay stressed this issue was on the agenda for the Highland Council, but current fiscal constraints meant the item was lower on the priority list than other areas.

Cllr Mathew Reiss commented that some temporary “goodwill” repairs had been made to the car park after complaints were made and suggested a letter to be sent to HC Roads Department, Communities and Place – General Fund. - **ONGOING**

**ACTION RAISED CTF2023 M003/A001** – Chair to send a letter to Chief Executive / Head of Roads department raising concerns over the conditions of what is perceived as the busiest car parks in Thurso (Co-op Car Park and Tennis Court Car Park) - **ONGOING**

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

**David Summers update 06.11.23** Aaron’s of Wick agreed that the connection time was tight. There had been difficulty in maintaining connections with the flights and the Gills Bay ferry, but they were going to suggest a solution. Discussion to be continued. - **ONGOING**

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

**David Summers updated 06.11.23** Paused while timetable revisions were under consideration but would progress once agreed. - **ONGOING**

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

**Robert Gillespie updated 06.07.23** Timetables had been put into the travel agents in both Wick and Thurso. One would be dropped off at the tourist info office at John O’Groats. There was also a new delivery of timetables from Hi-Trans which would have been distributed within the week. There were no proper places to fix them in a lot of the bus stops/shelters and they were being attached with tape, which was not visually appealing. – **COMPLETE**

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

The meeting was planned to take place in Helmsdale on 23.11.23 at 2pm. An invitation had been circulated to Forum Members. An update on this meeting would be provided at the next meeting of the CTF, scheduled for March 2024 - **ONGOING**

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

## 4. Matters Arising

- 4.1. The Chair highlighted an update provided by Peter Faccenda, Programme Manager, Focus North regarding the Transport Demand Study undertaken by Focus North for Caithness and North Sutherland. **(Appendix C)**. The initial report had been received and modelling of demand had identified a proposed approach based around multi-centred small multiple occupancy vehicles, with an over-arching transport co-ordination organisation.
- 4.2. The Chair commented that the whole of Sutherland has been included in the Transport Demand Study, however, Councillor Richard Gale (Ward: 04 East Sutherland and Edderton) and the Kyle of Sutherland Development Trust were looking at setting up a Transport NGO to progress opportunities for the Sutherland area.
- 4.3. The Chair advised that the CTF would be kept abreast of developments on the progress of the Study.

## 5. Transport Updates

### 5.1. Wick John O’Groats Airport / HIAL

- 5.1.1. **A written update was provided by HIAL (Appendix D)** and in addition, Dougie Cook provided the following update:
- 5.1.2. Stewart Adams, Interim Managing Director HIAL would be in post until the end of March. As part of his remit, he had launched “Operation Re-Balance”, addressing both savings and efficiencies across HIAL. Work had begun to identify opportunities at Wick Airport.
- 5.1.3. The shortage of Operational Controllers at Wick Airport was mentioned as a matter of concern. The airport having only 3 Operational Controllers, compared to the required 5. This shortfall was due to external circumstances beyond HIAL’s control. However– two ATC candidates successfully completed their training and were awaiting unit validations, which can take up to 6 months. The total duration of the training process was around 18 months. Both candidates were expected to clear the validation process by the summer of 2024. After which, the airport would be able to meet its full staffing requirement of 5 Operational Controllers.
- 5.1.4. The ATC service provided at Wick Airport and Island Airports has been bespoke, as it used “Tower Control” which was not readily used at airports further south, due to other methods of surveillance.
- 5.1.5. Wick Airport had completed a successful emergency exercise in the last month which looked specifically at post-emergency arrangements.
- 5.1.6. In October, the Sustainable Aviation Test Environment (SATE) and HIAL welcomed ARC Aerosystems, a consortium partner, to Wick Airport. During the visit, tethered trials were conducted with the ARC C-600, which is an autonomous aircraft and the largest VTOL UAV in Europe. ARC Aerosystems designed and built the C-600. They are expected to return to Wick in 2024 to conduct further trials.
- 5.1.7. Cllr Ron Gunn asked if the current ATC provision would impact emergency air ambulance arrangements. Dougie Cook advised this was separate from ATC and fell under Air Jobs Flight Information Service, undertaken by FISO. There were 5 FISOs in place, with two recruits coming through.

- 5.1.8. **A written update was provided by Highland Council PSO (Appendix E)** and in addition, David Swanson provided the following update:
- 5.1.9. Controllable reliability had increased from 90% (June) to regularly achieving 98%. Highland Council was in regular discussions with Eastern Airways to mitigate service disruption where possible. Eastern Airways had undertaken a crew recruitment exercise to help with reliability.
- 5.1.10. Efforts had been made to optimise the winter flight schedule to help lower the risk of weather disruption and give the best chance at maintaining reliability of service, this also reduced the impact with regards to ATC cover.
- 5.1.11. A funding package had been agreed for winter de-icing.
- 5.1.12. Dougie Cook commented that the Airport would reduce opening hours for two weeks over the festive period which allowed time off for ATC. PSO flights were not affected by these arrangements.
- 5.1.13. The Chair asked for an update on the submission of the business case, which concerned the continued funding of the PSO. The funding for the 2024 financial year was under review by Transport Scotland. Caithness Chamber of Commerce had been actively lobbying the Scottish Government to provide life-line air connectivity and prevent a threat to the service.

The Chair commented that the government's response had not been positive, and budgetary constraints were cited as a significant factor affecting the decision-making process. The Chair expressed concern that the viability of the PSO had been judged unfairly based on a pre-COVID business case, as the PSO was performing well, and patronage was increasing year on year. The first year of service was adversely affected by the impact of COVID and was felt across the aviation sector, resulting in reduced connectivity from Aberdeen Airport.

David Swanson highlighted the Highland Council had been in constant dialogue with Transport Scotland since the submission of the new business case and feedback had been positive.

- 5.1.14. The Chair added that a cross-party letter was sent to the Transport Minister, Fiona Hyslop MSP, from Rhoda Grant MSP, Douglas Ross MSP, Jamie Halcro Johnson MSP, Donald Cameron MSP and Edward Mountain MSP, highlighting support for the service and providing further evidence for justification of the service.

Both Caithness Chamber of Commerce and MSPs (listed above) were attempting to secure a meeting with the Transport Minister.

- 5.1.15. The Chair asked for the Highland Council's position regarding the delay to the decision made by the Transport Minister regarding the future of PSO funding support. David Swanson responded that the Highland Council were hoping to have a response to the decision within the next 7 days, but this was not confirmed.

The Chair stressed the imperative nature of the matter and speculated delays to the decision could stretch into the new year.

- 5.1.16. Cllr Mathew Reiss asked what legal obligation the Scottish Government had with regards to the funding agreement in place for the provision of the PSO and what the future of Wick Airport would be if a decision was made to withdraw funding for the service.
- 5.1.17. The Chair commented the decision would impact the sustainability of the airport and put it at risk of closure.

Dougie Cook commented that the decision would result in the loss of scheduled flights, potential closure of the airport, and a greatly reduced operation running with skeleton staff.

- 5.1.18. David Swanson suggested that it was important for members of the Forum to remain cognisant of the public perception of the airport and flight services. If public confidence declined, it could lead to a reduction in the number of people using these services. The Highland Council was in talks with Transport Scotland and was making a strong case for the continuation of funding for the service. It was stressed that it was crucial to manage public messaging carefully during the decision-making process.

The Chair commented that it was frustrating and disappointing that this uncertainty hampered efforts to grow and build upon the service. Emphasising that local stakeholders including the Focus North partnership had a shared vision and commitment to the service. Partners had been working collaboratively to sustain the service and lobbying efforts would continue.

## 5.2. Scrabster Harbour

- 5.2.1. **A written update was provided by Scrabster Harbour Trust (Appendix F)** and in addition, Sandy Mackie provided the following update:
- 5.2.2. The Harbour had been performing exceptionally well, with a notable increase in vessel tonnage, vessel arrivals, and passenger figures. The ferry service had shown strong growth, indicating an increase in tourism traffic on the Scrabster-Stromness route. Cruise activity at the Harbour had also been good. Financially, the Harbour had its best-ever half-year, which had set a solid foundation for the year ahead.
- 5.2.3. Looking ahead, developments in the Offshore Wind Sector were a major opportunity for the Harbour. There were challenges for the Harbour, with wider transport infrastructure, skills and workforce capacity in the region.
- 5.2.4. There were no details available regarding the announcements at the Scottish Green Conference with regards to the introduction of a Cruise Levy by the Scottish Government. However, there were concerns over how this would be perceived by the cruise companies and what the mechanism would be for the collection of funds.
- 5.2.5. Dry docking was scheduled to take place in January for the MV Hamnavoe.
- 5.2.6. Cllr Willie Mackay commented on reports that passenger numbers on Cruise Ships were down and asked if this had been reflected at Scrabster.
- 5.2.7. Sandy Mackie commented that across the industry ships had not been at full capacity, citing the impact of the cost of living crisis plus hangover from the pandemic as possible reasons. Scrabster had over 10,000 passengers through cruise ship traffic this year, highlighting a 50% increase on previous years, with the next best year seeing 5,000 passengers. Predictions were that the 2024 season will again see 10,000 passengers. Given that passenger figures were not at capacity, as confidence returns it would be expected that these numbers would grow.

### 5.3. Wick Harbour

5.3.1. **A written update was provided (Appendix G).**

5.3.2. The Chair highlighted significant damage to the wall at Wick Harbour as a major concern and reported attendance at a stakeholder meeting to discuss potential solutions and support available.

### 5.4. Gills Harbour

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 H).**

### 5.6. Serco NorthLink

5.6.1. Kris Bevan provided the following update:

5.6.2. Year to date 31st October 2023: Volumes – 190,464 passengers up 42,833 on the previous year an increase of 29%, Non-commercial vehicles: 65,124 up from 52,428 in 202 an increase of 12,696 or 24%. Freight 74,244 laden meter 54,500 on previous year an increase of 19,725 or 37%. Good performance, reflecting increases reported by Scrabster Harbour.

5.6.3. Year to date 31st October: MV Hamnavoe Vessel operational activity: There had been 1,495 sailings of a scheduled 1,553, with 58 sailings cancelled on the year to date. Almost half of all cancelled services occurred in October, with disruption due to severe south-easterly gales. The operated sailings figure included the additional 85 sailings provided in May and June, providing additional capacity during the failure of the MV Pentalina.

5.6.4. From the 1st of October 2023, the MV Hamnavoe would operate on an off-peak schedule. The vessel was scheduled to undergo dry docking from the 8th to the 21st of January in 2024. During this period, no service was available between Stromness and Scrabster, and no replacement tonnage provided. However, daily connectivity between Orkney and the Scottish mainland would be maintained through the Kirkwall and Aberdeen route.

5.6.5. Bookings were open until March 2024, with fares and timetables confirmed by Transport Scotland.

5.6.6. In October, NorthLink collaborated with Reid's Bakery in Thurso producing their own brand of shortbread and showcased their dedication to local procurement.

5.6.7. Since its launch in the early summer, the dog lounge had carried 4,500 dogs.

5.6.8. The Chair commented on booking availability up until the end of March 2024, and disappointment with no replacement for the MV Hamnavoe during dry docking and asked if Pentland Ferries would be running additional services during the scheduled dry docking.

Kris Bevan commented that the announcement made on 22.06.24 extended bookings and timetabling through to the end of March 2024, including a fares freeze. However, they were awaiting a further update.

Kris Bevan mentioned that he was not aware of any extra services that Pentland Ferries had planned for the dry docking of MV Hamnavoe. However, discussions were held to ensure that the dry docking for both vessels did not take place at the same time.



## 5.7. Highland Council Roads

- 5.7.1. The Chair brought up the topic of implementing and rolling out of the 20mph speed limit signage across the road network. The Chair requested an update from Johnathan Gunn regarding the resolution of any issues related to this matter, to which Johnathan provided the following update:

The project delivery of installing the 20mph signage was affected due to the Highland Council roads team facing capacity issues caused by work commitments, holiday, and short staffing entitlements. As a result, the task was assigned to the Highland Council Street lighting team, which led to some issues. There had been a delay in obtaining the illuminated 20mph signs. The knock-on effect of this had caused further issues and delays.

There were communication difficulties and confusion of the graduation of speed limits from leaving a 60mph zone into a 20mph zone. Scottish Government advised that painted road surface signage did not need to be removed due to the cost implications, which caused further confusion for road users and issues with Police enforcement.

- 5.7.2. During the discussion, the Chair raised concerns about the enforcement of the 20mph speed limit by the Police. Particularly in areas where both 20mph and 30mph signs were present on the same section of the road.

Cllr Mathew Reiss commented that it needed to be proven beyond all reasonable doubt that an offence had been committed. The presence of both 20mph and 30mph road signs would have raised issues regarding enforcement of this by Police Scotland.

- 5.7.3. Johnathan Gunn reported that during the summer, the Highland Council roads department spent £1.8 million on a road resurfacing programme. £500,000 of work was set to be completed before Christmas. This accounted for around 90% of the budget, with the remaining 10% used for repairs to roads damaged from winter conditions, beyond current expectations.

In January 2024, the Highland Councillors would receive a draft works programme for 2024/25. However, this would be caveated with the caution that changes to the programme may be necessary depending on the impact of winter conditions on the roads network during the months of January, February, and March.

- 5.7.4. Johnathan Gunn commented that the Highland Council roads department were also addressing some ongoing drainage issues.

The Chair commented that the issue of flooding on Traill Street / Mansons Lane (Thurso) had been raised with Marco Bardelli, Transport Scotland earlier this month. Marco had responded that the former Floods Group would be reconvened.

Jonathan Gunn mentioned that he met with the Scottish Water design team the previous day and had proposed a solution. However, funding needed to be secured. Jonathan explained that, after conducting investigations, it was determined that the problem was not caused by the sewer reaching capacity. Instead, the issue was due to excess water not able to enter the sewer system due to insufficient road gullies available. Scottish Water prohibited the connection of new gullies to the sewer, therefore the only solution was to install a new drain which tied into the river directly. This had challenges related to the services available on the proposed site.

The Chair asked if any short-term solutions were possible to mitigate the issues and help businesses which were suffering from the flood disruption to their premises.

Jonathan Gunn commented the issue was complex and would take some time to resolve. Jonathan also highlighted that the **A Forss for Change**

*Forss Business & Energy Park is a 200-acre site situated 7 miles west of Thurso town, comprising of 60,000 sq ft of combined office and industrial space, alongside a 6 turbine windfarm and an Anaerobic Digestion Plant.*

*Under new management since March 2024, the park has gone from strength to strength in recent months. Existing tenants, including North Pont Distillery, have expanded their premises by a combined total of 16,000 sq ft. Some new faces have also joined the base, including Carries Couthie Café which opened in July and services both the park and public.*

*Famed for its early life as NAVCOMMSTA Thurso, a cold war American Navy Base, Forss Business Park is known to many, both locally and overseas. Its rich history is still hidden throughout the site to this day, and with plans in place to develop a visitor centre showcasing it's many lives, this will once again be visible to the public. Other exciting plans for future development include further renewable energy, battery storage units and potential data centres.*

*From clay pigeon shooting and distillery tours, to delicious meals and baked goods, our vacant office space has never looked more appealing. **Check it out at [forsspark.co.uk](http://forsspark.co.uk) or call 01847 808100.***

John Deighan commented that this must be affecting the shops and businesses and their insurances.

5.7.5. The Chair asked if there were any questions.

Cllr Ron Gunn asked if there was any update to flooding at the sub-station.

Jonathan Gunn reported that the issue had been raised with SSE, but it was pending water removal to allow a camera survey to find the cause of the flooding.

5.7.6. Cllr Mathew Reiss commented that the Scottish Government has stated that some of the existing 20mph zones will be reversed. Speed traffic analysis was being conducted on the new zones, which may have indicated a reason for the reluctance to invest budget into some of the more expensive changes, which may also need to be reversed.

Cllr Mathew Reiss asked for indicative costs of the drainage projects at Traill Street and Mansons Lane. Jonathan Gunn speculated the costs would be in the hundreds of thousands.

Cllr Mathew Reiss thanked the Thurso Heritage Society for their assistance in obtaining old maps related to drainage plans.

## 5.8. BEAR Scotland / Transport Scotland

5.8.1. **Marco Bardelli provided a written update (Appendix I)** He was not present at the meeting.

5.8.2. Following correspondence with Marco Bardelli, The Chair provided the following additional update:

- 5.8.3. Bear Scotland were doing everything possible to extend working hours and reduce delays caused by the Tesco traffic light scheme, with the aim of improved provision for pedestrians crossing. A list of the trunk road programme of works was provided.

## 5.9. Highland Council Public Transport

- 5.9.1. No update was provided in advance of the meeting from Highland Council public transport and due to technical difficulties, the representative Laura Carpenter, was not connected to the meeting at the time of this update.

## 5.10. Stagecoach

- 5.10.1. Wayne Malcolm, Stagecoach North provided an update on steadily increasing passenger numbers and saw a return to pre-COVID levels and good staffing provision at the Thurso depot.
- 5.10.2. Cllr Ronn Gunn raised a question regarding Stagecoach Route 82 and complaints received from passengers joining the service at Castletown. Passengers had been denied access to board the bus service at stops outside the School and old bakery shop. Wayne Malcolm commented that passengers were allowed to join the bus at these stops, and it would be communicated clearly to drivers to allow this to take place.
- 5.10.3. A comment was made by Beatrice Farmer regarding the discomfort of passengers on the X99 service, due to bumpy road conditions. Cllr Willie Mackay commented this was caused by the bus wheels caught in the gullies and an uneven road surface in places resulting in an uncomfortable travel experience for passengers. Cllr Janet McEwan commented that the A9 North of Dornoch was not adequate for the size of vehicles and volumes of traffic on the road. The Chair highlighted the limited scope for widening the road but said the CTF would keep lobbying for improvements and upkeep.

## 5.11. ScotRail

- 5.11.1. **A written update was provided by ScotRail (Appendix J)** and in addition, Ryan Savage provided the following update:

Passenger demand on average on the Far North Line (FNL) indicated a return to pre-COVID patronage, with a 21% increase on Sunday travel. The strongest recovery had been seen in the leisure travel market. The “Highland Rover” ticketing option had performed well with overseas visitors. Marketing campaigns were focusing on positioning train travel as part of the holiday experience.

Ryan Savage highlighted coverage of the FNL on TV documentaries broadcast domestically and internationally and commented on the positive development and good work of the new Far North Line Community Rail Partnership (FNLCRP).

- 5.11.2. The Chair asked for an operational update regarding recent travel disruptions to services. Ryan Savage was unable to give any further update.

The Chair asked if there was any update on the “Rail and Sail” ticketing, with Highland Taxis as the connection provider. Ryan Savage said there was no feedback on this, the Taxi provision was reliable and complaints on the FNL were very low. The Chair requested further information on the “Rail and Sail” ticketing and its marketing and awareness.

- 5.11.3. John Deighan asked for updates on whether services were currently operational from Thurso/Wick through to Inverness and what the provision was with regards to through services, given the damage to the sea wall between Brora and Helmsdale.

David Swanson commented that recent experience of travel on the FNL (31.10.23) indicated poor communication with passengers regarding travel disruption / connection of the service. Information on the board was unclear and limited information was available.

Ryan Savage was unable to give any further operational updates at present but would take back the feedback on communication of service disruption to passengers.

**CTF2023 M003/A002:** Ryan Savage to update on options for improved communication methods.

## 5.12. Far North Line Community Rail Partnership

- 5.12.1. **A written update was provided by Far North Community Rail Partnership (Appendix K)** and in addition, Mike Wilmot provided the following update:

- 5.12.2. Regarding the service disruptions, Mike Wilmot commented that a temporary repair to the sea wall was completed on the Thursday, with full services running normally - Thurso/Wick through to Inverness.

Mike Wilmot highlighted progress to the new development of the FNLCRP website. Mike Wilmot emphasised that improving transport integration was a key priority for the FNLCRP and highlighted the phases of this were publishing timetables, publishing joint timetables and operators running services which provide convenient interchange, including promoting onward travel through interconnected services such as rail/ferry trains.

## 6. Any Other Business

- 6.1.1. None.

## 7. Date of Next Meeting

- 7.1.1. The next meeting is to take place on Wednesday 20th March 2024 both in person and virtually.
- 7.1.2. There being no further business, the Chair thanked everyone and closed the meeting.

Trudy Morris

Chair, CTF

8<sup>th</sup> November 2023

## Actions ongoing from previous meetings

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

The Chair expressed disappointment that a representative from the Ferries Directorate was unable to attend the meeting. An update has been provided and circulated. **(Appendix A)**

The Chair said the CTF would continue to pursue the issue of the delay to the rollout of the RET on Northern Isles Ferry services. - **ONGOING**

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**ACTION RAISED CTF2023 M003/A001** – Chair to send a letter to Chief Executive / Head of Roads department raising concerns over the conditions of what is perceived as the busiest car parks in Thurso (Co-op Car Park and Tennis Court Car Park) - **ONGOING**

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

**David Summers update 06.11.23** Aaron’s of Wick agreed that the connection time was tight. There has been difficulty in maintaining connections with the flights and the Gills Bay ferry, but they were going to suggest a solution. Discussion to be continued. - **ONGOING**

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

**David Summers updated 06.11.23** - Paused while timetable revisions were under consideration but would progress once agreed. - **ONGOING**

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

The meeting was planned to take place in Helmsdale on 23.11.23 at 2pm. An invitation had been circulated to Forum Members. An update on this meeting would be provided at the next meeting of the CTF, scheduled for March 2024 - **ONGOING**

## Actions arising from this meeting

**CTF2023 M003/A001:** Chair to send a letter to Chief Executive / Head of Roads department raising concerns over the conditions of what is perceived as the busiest car parks in Thurso (Co-op Car Park and Tennis Court Car Park)

**CTF2023 M003/A002:** Ryan Savage to update on options for improved communication methods.

## Appendix A

### **Update provided by Brian Gordon, Operational Policy, Ferries Directorate – 06/11/23**

Unfortunately, we are unable to attend the meeting this week, I have however provided a short update on ferry fares issues below. I hope this is helpful.

The Scottish Government is progressing with the Fair Fares Review to ensure a sustainable and integrated approach to public transport fares. Our fares system must support the future long-term viability of a public transport system that is accessible, available and affordable for people throughout Scotland. The Review considers both the cost and availability of services and the range of discounts and concessionary schemes which are available on all modes including bus, rail, and ferry. It will report by the end of 2023 and will recommend a package of measures which can be considered for implementation from 2024-25 and onwards. These will provide opportunities to address the wider issues for the cost and availability of public transport services across all modes of public transport.

The Scottish Government announced on 28 October an extension of the existing National Ferry Concessionary Travel Scheme to cover all island residents under 22. Currently, young people aged 16-18 years old, and eligible full-time volunteers up to age 26, who are residents on a Scottish island receive 4 free single (two return) journeys to the mainland each year. The announcement confirmed that the Scottish Government intends to pursue the policy of extending the 4 free journeys per year to all island residents under 22 years of age. Transport Scotland will now carry out the necessary further work with ferry operators and partners to confirm timescales for implementation. This work is only at an early stage and the scheme is not yet live. Transport Scotland will confirm the timings in due course.

## Appendix B

**From:** [Trudy Morris](#)  
**To:** [Laura O'Kane](#)  
**Subject:** FW: Delmore Loop  
**Date:** 06 November 2023 11:49:24  
**Attachments:** [image001.png](#)

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**From:** Alexander Ross <[Alexander.Ross2@networkrail.co.uk](mailto:Alexander.Ross2@networkrail.co.uk)>  
**Sent:** Tuesday, August 1, 2023 7:49 AM  
**To:** Trudy Morris <[trudy@caithnesschamber.com](mailto:trudy@caithnesschamber.com)>  
**Subject:** Delmore Loop

You don't often get email from [alexander.ross2@networkrail.co.uk](mailto:alexander.ross2@networkrail.co.uk). [Learn why this is important](#)

OFFICIAL

Dear Ms Morris,

Thank you for getting in touch for an update on our plans for the Delmore Loop.

The Delmore loop one of two enhancements planned as part of phase 2 of the Far North Line Enhancements project. It was funded through to the end of the design stage.

This is now coming to completion which is allowing us, as noted in your letter, to seek the relevant planning approvals.

We are currently reviewing our timetable modelling to allow us to reconfirm the benefits of delivery of this scheme. Once this and the planning process are complete we may be in a position to submit our business case to Transport Scotland for the delivery funding.

It is worth noting that the rail industry operates in quite a constrained fiscal environment, particularly following the pandemic and changes to the public's travel habits. Nonetheless, we remain supportive of continuing to improve the service offered.

We will update you when we have further information on our plans, but I hope this is helpful in the meantime.

Kind regards,

Alex



**Alex Ross**  
Senior Public Affairs Manager  
Scotland's Railway

Network Rail  
151 St Vincent Street, Glasgow, G2 5NW



## Appendix C

### Focus North Transport Study Update

**Peter Faccenda**

#### Focus North Programme Manager

Following the review and relaunch of the partnership under the Focus North identity completed in February 2023, immediate actions are aligned to supporting the growth of a skilled workforce and maximising the local benefits of numerous current developmental opportunities.

Following the relaunch of the partnership under the Focus North banner completed in February 2023, which identified stakeholder priority areas and continue to be:

1. Increasing the pool of skilled personnel.
2. Infrastructure, transport, and accommodation to support growth in the workforce and improve the Inward Investment offering.
3. Strengthening the Digital Economy
4. Specific Inward investment and project development opportunities

Update relevant to the Transport Forum regarding transport for employment.

From Stakeholder input, it has become clear that transport requirements are evolving, with Dounreay, other employers, the local college, and many other transport users having changed travel habits with more people working and studying remotely. These changing patterns and the urgent requirement to decarbonise transport immediate future identified that a wide-ranging rethink is needed.

The first step agreed upon was to map current and future demand to inform alternative transport solutions and model the effects of these. To make sure that the entire region's needs are considered Focus North partners commissioned a study from a specialist consultancy - Urban Foresight. The majority of the cost of this study is being met through the Caithness place-based demonstrator project, with additional support from NRS Dounreay and the Sutherland transport committee. This study is due to be completed during November 2023 and will inform the actions to be included in the programme. This study covers the geographic area of Caithness and Sutherland and activities are being coordinated with the Sutherland Transport group.

Urban Foresight research has consisted of desktop research, interviews with stakeholders and a (mainly online) survey which had more than 350 responses received. Modelling of demand has identified a proposed approach – based around multi-centred small multiple occupancy vehicles, with an over-arching transport coordination organisation. Initial stakeholder discussions held in Sutherland (4 Oct) and Caithness (5 Oct) looking at concepts were encouraging and informed further detailed work on an organisational model, costings and identifying key issues is now underway. The final report is still due for completion in November and actions will be identified from this to be included in the Focus North Action plan. A second stage of activity in Sutherland is just being instigated which will trial some of the concepts and seek to establish an umbrella organisation.

## Appendix D

# Wick John O'Groats Airport

Ceangailte · Connected



## Caithness Transport Forum update November 2023.

### Public Service Obligation (PSO)

No changes to the schedule for winter other than a reduction in flights during the festive period.

### 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.

### Statistics for HIAL:

September 2023: Year-to-date passenger numbers have increased by 7% against September 2022.

September 2023: Aircraft movements are static compared to last year with an increase of 0.2% on 2022.

### Statistics for Wick JOG:

Passenger numbers: Year-to-date increase of 29% against 2022/23

Passenger numbers are forecast to be over 11,000 for the year.

Aircraft movements: Year to date down by 6% against 2022/23

### Ongoing works

We have conducted a major repair to the terminal building roof.

Works on the new office for security are nearing completion.

### Projects update

We have had funding approved for a new de-icer trailer to be delivered this fiscal year.

A foreign object debris (FOD) mat has also been approved to allow easier removal of small stones etc.

### Audits and Safety meetings

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

The winter ops kick-off meeting will be held on 7th November to discuss the upcoming winter season.

We had a CAA aerodrome audit in August which went well.

## Staffing levels

ATC staffing is currently reduced to three operational ATCOs.

The two ATC trainees have commenced their validation training.

The fire service recently successfully recruited another member of staff taking numbers back to full compliment once the recruit training plan is complete.

## 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 until Easter 2024.

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.

## ARC Aerosystems Trial

A successful trial of ARC Aerosystems C600 Electric Vertical Take-off and Landing (EVTOL) Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV) was conducted at Wick JOG Airport on 7th October.

This was the first UK flight of the largest VTOL UAV in Europe as part of the Sustainable Aviation Test Environment (SATE) project.

The first CAA-approved operational safety case was issued for a UAV of this size.

The airport then hosted stakeholder engagement session on the 24th of October followed by a community engagement day on the 25th with 80 students from 3 local schools attending.

## Appendix E

### Wick PSO update for Caithness Transport Forum

#### Year 2 summary to date

Passenger figures to date continue to be extremely promising, averaging 16% year-on-year growth when known outliers are excluded<sup>1</sup>. October has seen poorer performance than other months, in part due to ongoing severe weather issues across the country impacting wider travel plans.

Month	Pax (Actual)	Pax (22/23)	Diff (%)
Apr-23	859	520	65%
May-23	896	788	14%
Jun-23	955	828	15%
Jul-23	938	712	32%
Aug-23	1162	773	50%
Sep-23	942	794	19%
Oct-23	908	910	0%

Travel and booking patterns continue to be more strongly clustered around weekends, with midweek figures slightly lower by comparison. Passengers continue to book relatively close to their date of travel, with significant booking volumes seen in the seven days prior to the intended date of travel

#### Performance and Reliability

Performance and reliability over the period from June to October 2023 have been largely in line with expectations, with the exception of a period of poor reliability in June and lower-than-expected on-time performance in September:

Month	Planned	Operated	%Operated	CANX Reasons	Reliability (controllable)	OTP
Jun-23	96	84	88%	2 x Weather 6 x Crew 2 x Tech 4 x Operational	90%	80%
Jul-23	94	90	96%	4 x Weather	100%	Data unavailable
Aug-23	100	98	98%	2 x Crew 2 x Weather 2 x Crew 2 x	98%	82%
Sep-23	92	86	93%	Operational	96%	77%
Oct-23	90	88	98%	2 x Weather	100%	80%

While the Council continues to work with Eastern to minimise delays and cancellations, and to mitigate against the impact of these when they do occur, these figures should be understood in context.

<sup>1</sup> April 2023 as 2022 service started mid-April and to a limited timetable; August 2023 due to impact of price trial  
Appendix E

A comparison against the Civil Aviation Authority's performance and reliability statistics for other Scottish routes in August 2023 (the latest available), for example, shows that the Wick-Aberdeen route is:

- Joint 3rd out of 15 for reliability
- 2nd out of 15 for on-time performance (within 15 minutes of scheduled time of arrival)
- Joint 2nd out of 15 for lowest average delay minutes

<b>Airport</b>	<b>Reliability</b>	<b>OTP</b>	<b>Average Delay (mins)</b>
Barra	93%	72%	11
Benbecula	100%	61%	25
Campbeltown	95%	90%	4
Dundee	92%	79%	12
Islay	94%	60%	26
Kirkwall (ABZ)	99%	80%	13
Kirkwall (EDI)	95%	48%	33
Kirkwall (GLA)	87%	53%	30
Stornoway (EDI)	98%	35%	40
Stornoway (GLA)	96%	64%	25
Sumburgh (ABZ)	96%	59%	23
Sumburgh (EDI)	95%	51%	38
Sumburgh (GLA)	94%	50%	22
Tiree	95%	75%	12
Wick JOG	98%	82%	11

## Winter schedule

A winter schedule has been agreed with Eastern Airways and discussed with HIAL and Far North Aviation, along with wider PSO stakeholders. This will operate as follows:

- Until Friday 22nd December – to existing schedule (2 x daily weekday, 1 x Sunday)
- Saturday 23rd December – one-off 1 x daily Saturday service to enable pre-Christmas travel
- 24th-26th December – no service
- 27th-29th December – 1 x daily service (timings TBC)
- 30th December-1st January – no service
- 2nd-14th January – 1 x daily weekday, 1 x daily Sunday (timings TBC)
- 15th January onwards – return to regular schedule (2 x daily weekday, 1 x Sunday)

A similar schedule was operated in December 2022/January 2023 and proved effective – on review of booking and travel data from that period, it was decided to extend the single-daily January service for an additional week. This should continue to enable lifeline travel to and from the region, while minimising the financial and environmental impact of relatively limited demand for services during that period.

## 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 operated 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 were made available at a flat rate of £49.99, with bookings open for this special rate from 1 July and promotion taking place throughout July and August.

A draft report on the trial period has been produced and provided to Dounreay as the funder of the work. Following discussion and review of this report, it is hoped that detailed findings can be made available to PSO stakeholders.

A short summary of some key findings can be given at this stage:

- The availability of a £49.99 flat fare was found to drive additional demand on to the service, and confirmed the existence of additional price-sensitive, untapped demand in the leisure market
- No meaningful change in booking patterns was observed over the course of the trial period
- There do not appear to have been any long-tail impacts from the trial period, with bookings returning to expected levels in September and October 2023
- The increase in passenger levels observed was not sufficient to offset the reduced per-passenger revenue, and year-round provision of a flat fare at this level would not be sustainable in the long term

The data relating to the potential untapped demand in the leisure market in particular is positive, and the Council and Eastern will be reviewing this, along with other PSO stakeholders, to identify strategic opportunities to grow demand on the route.



### CAITHNESS TRANSPORT FORUM 8<sup>th</sup> November 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 first six months of financial year 2023-24 have seen strong activity across a range of sectors. The highlights from the half-year to 30<sup>th</sup> September 2023 are as follows.

- Total vessel arrivals 1,232. Up 14% on the previous year.
- Total vessel tonnage 5.860 million tonnes, up 12% on the 2022 position.
- Ferry passenger numbers totalled 159,850, a 30% increase.
- Fish box landings amounted to 142,821, a 1.3% decrease on last year.

- General cargo volumes amounted to 38,300 tonnes, a tenfold increase on the previous year. The total includes timber, road salt, wind turbine components and rock bags for offshore cable protection.
- Due to prolonged dry docking and change to shipping schedules there was disruption to the regular Faroes fish cargo traffic. Accordingly, the volumes carried to date 3,240 tonnes is 63% lower than the prior year level. The revised sailing schedule continues to arrive in Scrabster from Faroes on a Tuesday/Wednesday with the vessel then continuing on to Grimsby, Holland and Norway.
- Fuel deliveries by coastal tanker amounted to 15,842 tonnes, a 25% decline on the prior year level.
- Offshore Energy activity involved 44 vessels with a registered tonnage of 206,688 tonnes, around half of the 2022 level of activity.
- The 2023 cruise season completed on 19<sup>th</sup> September. It was a record season with sixteen vessels calling, with a total tonnage of 546,087 tonnes, bringing over 10,000 passengers and crew to the Far North.

## 2. LOOKING AHEAD & OTHER MATTERS

- There has been further delay, by the UK Government, to the introduction of new import controls. The Trust understands the new physical and identity checks on certain goods will now be introduced from 30<sup>th</sup> April 2024. The Trust is liaising with Highland Council and Animal & Plant Health Authority (APHA) to obtain Border Control Port designation well in advance of the introduction date.





- The Trust's appeal against the 2023 rateable valuation for the harbour undertaking is still ongoing. A new appeal process has been introduced with the aim of speeding up resolution.
- Both the Pentland Floating Wind project and the West of Orkney Offshore Wind project continue to make progress. The Pentland project announced their two-year survey programme to gather wind, wave and seabed data is complete. Similarly, the West of Orkney project have completed their offshore geotechnical and geophysical survey campaigns. The project has now submitted its offshore consent applications to Scottish Ministers for the proposed 2 GW offshore wind development.
- There are fourteen cruise ship bookings to date for season 2024.

**27<sup>th</sup> October 2023**

## Appendix G



### Update for Caithness Transport Forum -7<sup>th</sup> November 2023

#### Marina

Wick Marina had a very successful season, welcoming over 340 yachts to the harbour. Yacht days in port amounted to 810 and just under 900 crew, giving the town and county a welcome tourism boost. 13 new, long term vessels took up berths throughout the year

#### Cargo

Cargo ships numbers have picked up recently with the re-opening of the Subsea7 Pipeline Yard. Around 10 vessels due with pipes over the next 2 months. Following that there is expected Windfarm shipments for Camster 2 windfarm and further Pipe shipments for a second Subsea7 project.

#### Offshore Wind

Offshore Wind business has now completed their summer campaign period and Crew Transfer Vessel numbers have decreased to two vessels for the Winter. Enquiries for berthing Crew Transfer Vessels during Spring-Autumn 2024 are already being received.

#### Fishing.

Remains to be challenging for the local shell fishermen, with heavy sea resulting in both damaged and lost gear. Catches though have seen an upturn as we approach the peak of the season, especially for brown crab.

#### Harbour Damage

As I am sure many of you are aware, Wick Harbours Outer Harbour entrance suffered severe damage during Storm Babet. For two weeks the harbour took a pounding from the elements, resulting in a large crack forming on the outside wall and a loss of infill from the inner quay, causing the top surface to sink. Wick Harbour Authority are engaging with agencies, politicians, businesses, etc to enable work to begin to replace the damaged structure.

**Ian Cormack**

**Harbour Master**

**Wick Harbour**

## Appendix H



As announced earlier this month the MV Alfred will remain on charter to Calmac until late August 2024, a decision that allowed us to freeze fares on the Pentland Firth route until end of March 2025.

The MV Pentalina will continue to operate between Gills Bay and St Margarets Hope.

There are three return sailings per day over winter and this will also be the case over summer 2024.

Bookings are open up to end of October 2024 with a price freeze on this service as mentioned above.

Pentalina is due to dry dock on 27 January and this is expected to take approx 7 days, these dates will be confirmed in the coming weeks.

**Helen Inkster**

**Managing Director**

# Appendix I

Caithness Transport Forum 8  
November 2023 update

## Trunk Road work programme north of Inverness

Financial Year	Route	Location	Work Description	Traffic Management Type	Highland Council Area	Start	Duration	Day/ Night	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	complete
2023/24	A9	A9 South of The Mound	Inlay	Convoy	East Sutherland	26-Jun-23	6d	Dayshift	complete
2023/24	A9	A9 North of Struie	Inlay	Convoy then Closure with diversion	Cromarty Firth	26-Jun-23	20d	Nightshift	complete
2023/24	A9	A9 B9169 junction Black Isle	Inlay	Convoy	Black Isle	06-Aug-23	2d	Nightshift	complete
2023/24	A9	Thurso Signing	Signing improvements	Temporary Traffic Signals	North West Caithness	29-Aug-23	10d	Dayshift	complete
2023/24	A9	A9 North of Glenmorangie	Inlay	Convoy	Easter Ross	08-Aug-23	3d	Nightshift	complete
2023/24	A9	A9 North End of Helmsdale	Inlay	Closure with timed amnesties	East Sutherland	late Aug	6d	Nightshift	delayed 24/25
2023/24	A9	A9 North of Portgower	Inlay	Closure with timed amnesties	East Sutherland	late Aug	2d	Nightshift	delayed 24/25
2023/24	A9	A9 North of Hilliclay	Inlay	Convoy	North West Caithness	September	6d	Dayshift	complete
2023/24	A9	A9 Achalone	Inlay	Convoy	East Caithness	September	7d	Dayshift	complete
2023/24	A9	A9 Ainess to Tomich	Inlay	Convoy	Cromarty Firth	31-Oct-23	12d	Nightshift	Programmed 19/11/23
2023/24	A9	A9 south of Munlochy junction	Inlay	Convoy	Black Isle	12-Nov-23	10d	Nightshift	Programmed 4/3/24
2023/24	A9	A9 Evelix Bridge Sign	Signing improvements	Temporary Traffic Signals	East Sutherland	27-Nov-23	5d	Dayshift	planned
2023/24	A9	A9 Brora Gower Street Signs	Signing improvements	Temporary Traffic Signals	East Sutherland	27-Nov-23	3d	Dayshift	planned
2023/24	A9	A9 North of Tain	Drainage Works	Temporary Traffic Signals	Cromarty Firth	04-Dec-23	5d	Dayshift	planned
2023/24	A9	A9 Doll Junction on Bend	Signing improvements	Temporary Traffic Signals	East Sutherland	04-Dec-23	1d	Dayshift	planned
2023/24	A9	A9 / A836 / Tesco junction	Traffic Light upgrade	Temporary Traffic Signals	North West Caithness		12wk	Dayshift	ongoing

# Demand and travel patterns – Far North Line

Ave Periodic Journeys				2023/24 v
	2019/20	2022/23	2023/24	2019/20
Weekday	3,001	2,151	3,039	1%
Saturday	3,433	2,267	3,575	4%
Sunday	1,273	1,065	1,574	24%
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>2,816</b>	<b>2,012</b>	<b>2,906</b>	<b>3%</b>

Ave Weekly Journeys				2023/24 v
	2019/20	2022/23	2023/24	2019/20
Weekday	750	538	760	1%
Saturday	858	578	894	4%
Sunday	325	266	393	21%
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>706</b>	<b>504</b>	<b>727</b>	<b>3%</b>



# Marketing

- Post-Covid we have seen a stronger recovery in leisure travel and return of a strong visitor market with sales of Highland Rovers, for instance, double what they were in 2019.
- Our marketing campaigns are supporting/capitalising on these trends with our “Your Ticket Goes Further” and “Go by Train” campaigns. The campaigns encourage our customers to venture further and to use the train to facilitate new experiences, journeys and places.
- As a key visitor route, the FNL will benefit from this investment in promotion and raising awareness.



What's in it for me?



Unlock adventure

Cyclist, adventurer and photographer Markus Shtyr piloted our Highland Rover to the test. [Read more](#)



Unlock wilderness

Discover Scotland's wild places with the four-day Highland Rover travel pass. [Read more](#)



# Collaboration and Partnerships

- **We continue to support local activity on the FNL and to encourage collaborations and partnerships.**
  - Recent filming for Dutch TV
- **To maximise on opportunities, we are re-establishing the ScotRail Tourism Group for the Highlands.**
  - This will include local tourism stakeholders and aim to co-ordinate and improve our customer offer by aligning our partnership working.
- **A new Community Rail Partnership has been designated for the FNL and is now up and running.**
  - Our Community team will provide the group with support.
  - The marketing team have reached out to work with them on visitor opportunities as tourism is a key priority.
  - The group are currently developing a new route map for the FNL aimed at tourists.
- **We continue to support joint ticketing through Rail & Sail (taxi fee included).**
  - We recently appointed Highland Taxis as the new provider for customer connections between Thurso station and Scrabster harbour.



## Appendix K

### Report from the Far North Line Community Rail Partnership for the Caithness Transport Forum

November 2023

The Far North Line CRP covers the northern section of the railway line from Fearn to Wick and Thurso.

Since the CRP's report to the June meeting, ScotRail has agreed to fund in full design work on a CRP logo and the production of a CRP website. The purpose of the website will be:

- to bring together the promotion of the scenic attractions of the line with all the interesting destinations its serves
- to promote other alternative and sustainable transport modes: bus; community transport; bike & e-bike hire together with walking and cycling routes that can link with rail travel on the line and in the wider area
- to contribute to improving public transport integration in Caithness & Sutherland

The website, being built by Alex Kennedy of Squiggle Web Design, Lairg, will not duplicate information already available on other sites but rather include links to these (such as Venture North).

The home page will include a map in the same style as that for another CRP shown at the foot of this report with each station name having a link through to local information. The artist, Caroline Dadd of Origin Studios, has been engaged to create this.

All our contacts along the line are being asked to contribute local information on a web document which can be edited and added to by anyone with the link to it. There is also an appeal for images of local landmarks or traditional industries that can be included on the map.

For benefit of local communities, as well as promoting the idea there is another way for visitors to explore this region without adding to traffic on the NC500, the CRP will add its voice to others pressing for improved transport integration and collaboration on timetable presentation

To this end the CRP has been keen to promote the work done by Fiona MacDonald at Kyle of Sutherland Development Trust in developing a site, currently covering Sutherland only, that includes bus and train timetables and routes served in an ingenious way: <https://sway.office.com/qZCPTJGDCE1tHNAA>. We are working to see if this can be extended to Caithness.

Other transport sites we are linking to are

[Community Transport Map of Scotland – Google My Maps](#)

[Sutherland Transport Hubs](#): Here you can see routes served by ScotRail, Stagecoach, Rapsons or MacLeods (Durness Bus to be added); private hire coaches; and community transport. It might be useful to extend this to cover Caithness also.

Finally, Friday June 21<sup>st</sup> 2024, the day before the Friends of the Far North Line AGM in Inverness, is the date identified for an event to mark the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the opening of the line (in 1874) between Helmsdale and Wick/Thurso. This is most likely to be staged either in Helmsdale or Forsinard. As well as looking back over the line's history the occasion will be used to promote the CRP's role, with others, in promoting the line in years ahead.

Michael Willmot

