

Meeting of Caithness Community Planning Partnership - Minutes

Date: 02 Jun 23

Starting: 09:00

By MS Teams

Present: Eann Sinclair (HIE – Chair); Amanda Snashall (HERE for Caithness/ Caithness CARES); Jeya Calder (HIE); Bryan Dods (CVG Acting Secretary); Allan Tait (CVG); Alexander Glasgow; Dave Snashall (Listening Ear Caithness); Karen Hader-Homer; Ron Gunn (HC); Trudy Morris (Caithness Chamber); Christian Nicolson; (NHS) Sadie Kevill (CAB); Stephen Mezals (Police Scotland); Jan McEwan (HC); Randal Macauslan; Michael Simpson; Daniel Macleod (D&DWC); Mack Sutherland (HC); Kirsteen Campbell; Helen Ellis (HC Education); Matthew Thain (Police Scotland); Karl Rosie (HC)

Apologies: Siobhan Leen (NHS); Paddy Farrell (SFRS); Matthew Reiss (HC); Michelle Johnson (NHS)

Eann S welcomed everyone to the meeting and announced that Gail Prince has left HIE to take up a position with Highland Council as Planning Partnership co-ordinator for the HC entire region. Looking forward to a positive working partnership developing over time.

ACTION FROM PREVIOUS MEETING: On Eann S and Allan T, re Green Health presentation: Amanda (Snashall) has been in touch with Elsa: Kate Thompson has taken over the role. Allan T: We're working to see how we can support them. **Action Continues**

Presentation by Caithness Chamber of Commerce on Transport

Trudy Morris: Three main core Themes being addressed by Caithness Chamber and two areas of activity. Introduced Caithness Transport Forum – Aims to bring together local transport stakeholders and operators across Caithness – stretches into Sutherland as well because of natural interconnections.

About getting transport interconnectivity across road, rail, sea and air, progressing well. Chamber took over running this is 2021/22, funded predominantly by Dounreay, small contribution from Highland Council.

BEAR Scotland/ Transport Scotland are involved, Highland Council re roads and sometimes buses, Pentland Ferries & Northlink re ferries, Scotrail & stagecoach re trains & buses respectively, Stagecoach (changed recently) and Wick JOG Airport, HIAL. Other stakeholders include some harbours, association of community councils (public can feed in).

This is not a public forum, stakeholders involved in transport, Dounreay Stakeholders Group, Councillors etc. and HIE.

Chamber chairs and facilitates 3 meetings a year, input into lots of transport consultations – recent ones for HiTrans and HC's local transport strategy. Also meetings with government ministers & civil servants, an example is Scottish Rail Holding, set up to manage Scotrail on behalf of SG.

Lobbying & campaigning on transport issues, example the toilets on early morning trains from Caithness – failed and led to people missing connections - a big disappointment as new toilets had just been fitted. We find out what happened and push for improvements.

Always working to improve the various aspects of transport we have. Shaving seconds and minutes off journey times, trying to improve where there are regular failures e.g. Berriedale Braes improvements, buses not fit for purpose due to accessibility issues.

Focus North was rebranded early in 23, conference in February was well attended, aim is to build community resilience as Dounreay jobs reduce and attract investment, build workforce to meet needs.

Obviously decent transport is key. Not enough buses, not enough people using buses to justify increased timetables. HC switching suppliers for bus services caused problems which are still being resolved, state of roads have been a serious concern. Caithness and Sutherland require joined-up

approach, funding is a serious problem. A transport demand study is required, HC are looking into running their own services in Inverness, we can learn from that and build maybe. Need to ensure what is put into improving one aspect (buses) doesn't take away from others (trains).

SG has a pyramid/ tiered analysis scheme where using personal cars is at the bottom and walking/ cycling is at the top (preferred), this is likely to drive investment in transport in the future.

Chamber fed in that this is grand for cities, for rural remote areas these are not practical – no bike networks, personal cars are essential for work and health travel. e.g. Lochaber has a decent bus network, a good example of what can be done; Caithness & Sutherland could be a great test bed for piloting/ trialling ideas.

Eann S commended the enabling work that has been going on, and the enhancements that have been made in the last 10 years or so. Chamber has been pivotal in that.

Trudy added that Chamber trying to get funding for full consultation but in the meantime there may be community consultation e.g. surveys to be done – CPP members happy to share, spread word and take part.

Eann S pointed out that much had been lost due to COVID, many things e.g. train catering not restored.

Trudy: Existing franchise does not have provision for catering during winter months – trying to raise the need for hot drinks going south on train, must keep campaigning & lobbying. If you cease, you will lose what you have.

Jan McEwan: Really impressed with presentation and work that's been done on issue.

Alexander G: Who actually funded the Killimster Moss repairs?

Trudy/ Eann: Was Highland Council. It's a floating road over the Moss.

Alexander G: As 40 year old without car, pointing out that it leads to social isolation for many. Is the Transport forum engaging with outreach groups to address this?

Trudy: Major employers/ high wages can drive high car usage for some, but for others... trying to get a handle on this issue.

Eann S: I will contact some of the networks we're in contact with and bring information back to the table.

ACTION 1: Eann S investigate other areas efforts to reduce social isolation due to lack of transport

Ranald M: Roads in Wick are really horrendous just now – Any way we can push for improvement to the situation there just now?

Trudy: Will contact Jonathan Gunn in terms of what roads have priority just now. Over 4 year period, there has been a £4m underspend on roads across Highland, £2m of which was Caithness & Sutherland, which explains the stark reality of the state of the roads here. Council has put extra money in to try and remedy this, reality is there's a huge list needing work, only going to get through a certain amount of it. Going to Scot Gov probably wouldn't go down well due to that underspend.

Jan M: We got an additional £1.8m for Caithness but it's a drop in the ocean. Should be seeing improvements soon. Roads Dept doing the best they can with what they have.

Bryan D: Just like to say the road from Thurso to Reay is the best in the County just now thanks to works done, thanks to Council staff for a great job.

Eann S: The bus that was diverted due to poor road condition between Thurso-Shebster-Reay is now back to normal route.

Julie Calder: Just like to know how much the Council is paying out in claims for people whose cars have been damaged? Big waste of money, if roads were better it would need spending.

Mack S: I can get that info for you, also on roads priorities. Will try and get it for the Area business meeting on Monday the pass on to Trudy etc. also to the association of Caithness Community Councils as well.

ACTION 2: Mack S get roads data and circulate

Eann S: there are some community-led transport solutions, CVG's is probably one of the earlier ones, been going for a long time now and still.

Allan T made a presentation on Caithness Rural Transport.

- CRT has been running for 24 years now.
- 10 buses just now, 3 in Thurso, 6 in Wick (1 electric), 1 in Dunbeath.
- 22 volunteer drivers, 3 paid drivers and 2 co-ordinators extremely busy.
- Member based service – 230 members just now.
- £15 a year membership.
- Only operates in Caithness – don't do Raigmore trips even though there's demand – insufficient capacity just now.
- Also hire out buses to community groups sports clubs etc., they provide their own driver and can travel further but core work is Caithness. All vehicles wheelchair accessible.
- Main activities hospital, doctors' appointments, opticians, podiatry, shopping etc. Coffee meetings, even trips to pub occasionally!
- Main beneficiaries are those without transport, off bus routes, elderly and disabled folk.
- Prices depend on miles travelled; a sliding scale encourages booking in advance. Earliest demand is always high, always book as soon as you get appointments.
- Co-ordinators try to connect trips together to minimise expense and distance. Averaging 680 runs per month. A busy service.
- Costs: Just paid over £10k for insurance for vehicles. Repairs are considerable, road condition is affecting vehicles badly. Always on the lookout for volunteers' various times and days available.

One electric vehicle not massively used as it won't do the distance required, also charge points are often not working which adds to problem. We're looking for a just transition that supports community organisations, worried that if we can't use diesel vehicles, we may not be able to work due to costs. Funders expecting electric vehicles, we can't, due to limitations and cost. Thankfully local funding panels are aware of limitations and sympathetic.

Eann S: Is demand for memberships coming from effectively referral agencies or individuals?

Allan T: It's a bit of both really. We can take new members but ideally, we need new volunteers to cope with the extra work.

Jan M: Excellent service, late husband was a member and used regularly; How do you rent out to organisations?

Allan T: We encourage them to have their own driver which cuts the expense for them, also we're struggling to cover the core work, don't need to lose drivers for day trips.

Jan M: Do you need a special license to drive a bus?

Allan T: Volunteers can drive it on a car licence plus MIDAS training

Trudy M: Can you give this presentation to me for our consultants?

Allan T: Will do. Will be happy to contribute to any review that goes on.

ACTION 3: Allan T give presentation to Trudy (and all)

Karl R: Speaking about Just transitioning, let me assure you there is going to be a focus on EV charging in support of ownership and use in our area. Were you aware that there is a move to providing a transport scheme for Sutherland?

Eann S: Richard Gale is behind that initiative. Local member for Golspie.

Dave S: How does CRT pricewise compare to using a taxi?

Allan T: I think it would be cheaper but not sure, would imagine a Wick to Thurso run or similar would be much cheaper. Not sure how much taxis charge these days. Not there to compete with taxis, for vulnerable people and where there's not a bus we would do a run. I'll check prices and get back

ACTION 4: Allan T give comparative costs of CRT/ Taxis.

Dave S: Our Peer-Peer groups would be interested in that.

Allan T: Could be a problem at nights, having to get a volunteer driver to upgrade which is a challenge.

Dave S: As a EV owner, just pointing out that our car will do 200 miles on a hot day, be more like 180 in winter. Maybe factor that into requests for funding vehicles.

Daniel M: HC were looking at getting some EV charge points in Dunbeath, the car park at our centre. Anyone got any more information on if that will happen?

Mack S: I'll investigate for you Daniel.

ACTION 5: Mack S give D&DWC info on possible EV charger installations.

Jan M: But we do need more chargers in our area.

Allan T: Don't get any more electric buses wait for the hydrogen ones.

Bryan D: Is there mileage in encouraging local contractors to get their staff trained up to install and maintain chargers?

Eann S: Supply chain is just not geared up yet, all across Scotland and UK. A lot of thought going in at Gov level to remedy that.

Bryan D: Same applies to Smart Meters. Not enough people to service demand properly.

Eann S: Although a couple of companies up north are diversifying to accommodate that.

Karen Haden-Homer made a presentation, case study on transport problems.

Karen described the issues suffered by John, a man in the area with a number of health problems. A regular bus user travels 4-5 times a week to meet Karen re employability. Wants to volunteer and, long term, get a paid job. Has autism and quite significant mental health issues, his state has declined greatly this year. Bus issues played a big part in this decline.

Lockdown reduced the things he could attend, the bus problems earlier this year compounded his state greatly. Mum says he's unrecognisable from pre-COVID, she thinks it's vital that he get back into and continue his daily routine in order to restore his health.

Loves to visit the library. Volunteers, until recently. Lives with parents, they can offer him lifts but for his self-esteem he needs to be able to travel independently. Also respite for parents who are his full time carers. Small things, adult things are very important to him. Limited buses works quite well as he could spend ~3 hours in Thurso then return home. Often incidents or occasions where buses don't turn up., parents have to go and find him.

Worked well overall. However in January the bus contract changed (stagecoach to Aarons) and John only found out after waiting at the side of the road for 3 consecutive days with no bus. Nobody had any idea what was happening. Parents & Karen finally discovered the bus had been cancelled. Stagecoach cut the service; Aarons did not pick it up.

Even on social media nobody knew this was happening. May have been something on the bus but John didn't see it if there was. Had we known this was coming we could have made alternative plans and John wouldn't have been so upset.

As it stands, the service is going to be restored but we've had to change the bus stop he uses. And the time he can spend with his support workers is reduced.

The feeling is that he's not valued in the community. Many others have had similar experiences. Everyone is frustrated that nobody knew the changes were coming, nobody did anything to let the community know.

Buses are vital for those who are worst off in our communities. They should not be tampered with lightly. Tourists are also baffled by the lack of services or even information on the services that run.

Lack of communication was at the root of this problem. Poor John should not have had to deal with these issues.

Eann S: Fantastic presentation and a perfect illustration of what we've been talking about. Wonder if Trudy is aware of this issue through Transport Forum?

ACTION 6: Eann S check with Trudy re bus cancellation issue being known to Transport Forum

Michael S: Great presentation, gets the point across well. Just to note that 50% of us live in remote & rural areas. Do we have, can we have a voice to register our feelings about this? Transport Forum is not public, we need to be able to discuss this and not just leave it to organisations that are missing such important matters as communication.

I think the issue of EV funding is greenwashing to a degree. We need decent transport for workers, students and people travelling to appointments.

Eann S: The only comparable group I can think of is the Bus Users group, which used to be part of the transport Forum, not sure how it functions now.

ACTION 7: Eann S establish current situation with Bus Users Group

Amanda S: Point out the impact of a small thing to someone and the massive effect it has on their life. Communication is the key here. If social media had been used, better chance the word would have got about.

Bryan D: My mother took an interest in the bus user group, said the frustration that nothing was ever done about the complaints they made led many people to walk away. Companies/ organisations seemed to shrug their shoulders and say, that's all there is take it or leave it.

Kirsteen Campbell: My daughter's college bus was her link to the world, it just suddenly stopped and we were left without anything. Nearly dropped out of college because of it.

Mack Sutherland: I spoke to Linda Bremner on running bus pilots for getting people to job interviews etc. we did the surveys, made sure they ran at times people wanted, - nobody used them at all. What does success look like? Is this a real problem? How do we make improvements happen? The commercial aspect, if John was the only person on that bus, how are we making it pay? Unless it's fully subsidised, tricky, company will look at it and say no, we can't run it, regardless of the damage to individuals.

Eann S: We can't end up with a 2 speed economy based on access to an EV or whether we remain dependent on fossil fuels for the next 15-20 years which on our current trajectory we may well end up being.

Karl R: Whatever we do it has to be sustainable. Let's discuss this.

Michael S: This is a circular issue like housing. Should we have a Caithness Transport Co-ordinator role? Someone needs to take ownership of this or it will just keep going round. Can imagine how hard it is

for voluntary groups juggling balls and trying to address important issues, needs more than just a sticking plaster.

Eann S: There's Transport for Tongue, GoGolspie, KLB and Lochinver communities transport schemes. Housing, childcare, transport etc. are all inter-related in this.

Alexander G: Mack's point about bus provision costing £3k for 9 weeks with insufficient uptake to justify continuing. Conclusion was they should focus on e.g. CRT or taxis. But CRT are always short of volunteer drivers – another scheme got funding for a community bus but could not find a driver. Ad to hand the cash back. Issues with bus services being withdrawn due to potholes although the school bus service was able to continue. Why?

Mack S: We all need to be on the same page with this stuff. Waste of time & energy to all be doing the same things.

Eann S gave a brief update on the Highland CPP situation:

Gail Prince has moved to HC as co-ordinator for the region. All Highland CPPs. She will have a team round her including some secondees from partners. In Sutherland and Caithness CVG and Kyle Of Sutherland Development Trust are the preferred conduits for the team as they're tried and trusted in the field. We know the mechanisms; they've more or less worked for us for the last 2-3 years. Suspect it won't be till Sept- Oct that we have a functioning team, should make a huge difference to HCPP, HIE have just taken over HCPP Chair (through CEO Stuart Black).

There was a Scottish parliament inquiry into Community planning which we contributed to, and its outputs have been shared. Concluded that it is working well in some areas not in others in Highland because of the geography and complexity of structures. We've been starting to streamline and refine these. Upcoming meetings will be the first opportunity to scrutinise progress from thematic groups, and Highland CPPs. Feedback when it arrives, confident that we're heading towards a Highland CPP that has capacity to deliver.

Amanda S gave an update on Caithness CARES

Planet Youth – Meetings have taken place, well attended and received, have managed to get schools to agree not to offer alcohol as prizes in e.g. draws (supported by D&A forum). They attended a forum in Rome to network & identify issues for Highland.

Discovery College is now up and running in Caithness. At stage 2 of development keeping it low-key until the tech is proven.

Recovery community is progressing, some issue round long waits for rehab. Good work being done with Thurso Community Café. Caithness families support group is established, for families affected by substance misuse (1 meeting per week currently) Also the old AA & NA links are still in place. Mental health is still a major concern, highest rate of prescribed drugs for anxiety, depression etc, and the lowest rate of referral for support. Still lack of awareness of resources available in Caithness even among the 3rd sector. We've established a MH awareness raising forum where we've invited the 3rd sector and NHS to come forward work together to promote and raise awareness.

Brent Centre now has a base in Inverness and are looking to establish in Caithness. Free service to 14-21 year olds.

Perinatal infant mental health is a service the NHS provide, MH in mothers and babies focused on 1st 1001 days.

Mental health support training is being set up by CVG.

Caithness CARES meeting on 27th April had updates from Scottish Police Authority on community confidence actions research – good response so far. Meeting frequency changed from 12 weeks to 8 weeks.

NHS screening will be attending to raise awareness importance of attending appointments. Got a number of new organisations that have been added, anyone else looking for or promoting a service, get in touch.

Bryan D: Mental health training is planned, will advise on dates & locations closer to.

Ranald M: From D&A Forum – Basic support networks are still operating fully in the area However there are delays of up to 6 months for people to get down to Beechwood and get support. And the provision by Beechwood is inadequate because it drives people out and sends them straight back without a support network to exactly the same circumstances. 9 out of 10 cases, immediate relapse. It's respite care, not recovery. There's a gap in provision. Look at the resources being thrown at the Icelandic model and sports co-ordinator roles in Wick – That will maybe distract young people but it doesn't address the main problem.

Helen Ellis presented on Children's Planning.

Attendance has been a focus – discussions ongoing about how best to improve this in schools. A difficult task. Looking at focussing on P-S transition as a key period, can we improve that experience?

Caithness Bulletin is a great resource, now getting pushed out to all teachers.

Working with Keith (Moncur HLH) on achievement frameworks for some young people. If they're volunteering, they can get SQA accreditation and awards. Green awards, John Muir awards etc. contact him for more info.

Diversionary street basketball/ street football running 30th June.

Will be returning to main job shortly.

Bryan D gave a short update on Caithness Poverty Action Group

- Looking at planning for next winter.
- Tesco vouchers done for now.
- Working with schools on possible cereal bar provision – trail at Newton Park was successful.
- Looking to help youth groups over the summer. Activities and food.
- Home energy/heating – Warmlie and Wick Ignis, other initiatives brewing.
- Food bags etc support will recommence in autumn hopefully
- Big Workshop to plan in detail on 30th August at PPP.
- Hopefully will deal better with issues and pass others to CPP for action

Eann S: Some final notes, HIE considering continuing the Caithness Community catchup that last ran in March.

Next meeting of this group 1st September

Meeting ended at 12:05

Actions List

No.	Description	Lead	Status
1	Investigate other areas' efforts to reduce social isolation due to lack of transport	E Sinclair	Ongoing

2	Share data on roads priorities & claims for damage to vehicles	M Sutherland	
3	Share CVG transport presentation	A Tait	complete
4	Info on comparative costs of CRT/ Taxis	A Tait	
5	Info to D&DWC on possible EV charger installations	M Sutherland	
6	Check with Trudy re bus cancellation issue being known to Transport Forum	E Sinclair	complete
7	Establish current situation with Bus Users Group	E Sinclair	