

NOTES OF MEETING BETWEEN JAMIE STONE, MSP, CAITHNESS TRANSPORT FORUM AND KEITH BROWN, MINISTER FOR TRANSPORT AND INFRASTRUCTURE.

Jamie Stone MSP organised a meeting with Keith Brown, Minister for Transport and Infrastructure, and Transport Scotland official - Hugh Gillies, Development Management and Strategic Road Safety Manager. Jamie invited along representation from the Caithness Transport Forum, and John Green (Chair), Cllr David Flear and Koreen MacDougall attended a meeting in Holyrood yesterday to discuss improvements to the A9 Trunk Road (north), and we had a detailed discussion re Berriedale Braes.

Our 3 main arguments for the improvements were: Socio Economics; Safety and Reduction of Transport Time.

Hugh Gillies explained that Transport Scotland use the 'personal injury accidents' recorded in an area for their Route Safety File. These files hold a knowledge base that informs future road safety prioritisation. We explained that Berriedale Braes is a unique area, and put forward some of the other factors that attribute to the safety issues on this stretch of Trunk Road as previously discussed with Northern Constabulary at Caithness Transport Forum (see appendix 1 for extract from minutes)

The written brief available for the meeting can be found in Appendix 2 and explains the reasons for prioritising the need for realignment of the Berriedale Braes.

Minister Keith Brown and Transport Scotland Official Hugh Gillies left us with a promise that they would look into the proposal, and asked for any further evidence of need to be gathered. Given the socio-economic factors involved, the Minister is now considering the involvement of other sectors – Jim Mather, Minister for Enterprise, Energy and Tourism and Rosanna Cunningham, Minister for the Environment and Climate Change.

Caithness Partnership would be very grateful to receive further evidence to strengthen the case for improving the Berriedale Braes, so if anyone can assist with this could they please contact Koreen MacDougall to discuss? Colin MacKenzie, local engineer has agreed that we can forward a review of the options to improve Berriedale Braes that he has produced.

There are still some outstanding issues which need to be resolved including the report from the geophysical study of Berriedale Braes. The forthcoming Scottish Government election may also see a change in minister in charge of transport. Bearing that in mind though, it still feels like progress as there was a willingness shown to investigate the proposal further despite it being capital works not on the Transport Scotland Strategic Transport Projects Review.

Also attached is a picture of the proposed realignment for your information – see Appendix 3.

Kind regards,

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APPENDIX 1

EXTRACT OF CAITHNESS PARTNERSHIP TRANSPORT FORUM MINUTES

MINUTES OF THE THE CAITHNESS TRANSPORT FORUM

Date: 27-08-2010
Time: 10.30am
Location: Mowat Room, Assembly Rooms, Wick.

Item 8 Extract from minutes

8. Berriedale Braes

Koreen MacDougall explained to the meeting that she has asked Cllr Flear to provide an update from THC and Matthew Reiss, Northern Constabulary Area Commander from an emergency service perspective.

- 8.1. Cllr Flear explained that as a result of the extensive lobbying by THC and the CTF the £40k funded by HITRANS, THC and DSRL to conduct a study on Berriedale Braes has finally been accepted by Transport Scotland and has now been discussed with Neil Gillies, THC Director of Tec Services. Transport Scotland is to arrange the feasibility study which is believed to take place in October.
 - 8.1.1 Cllr Flear further explained that once the study is completed and is shared with the funders of the study, then we will be able to ascertain the viability of the proposed re-alignment. Cllr Flear stated that if the study shows that the proposal is not viable, then alternatives will need to be investigated. However, if the study concludes that it is viable, then we will be in a position where we will have to compete with the funding of other transport projects to which we should be able to build a strong case.
 - 8.1.2 Cllr Flear acknowledged all the hard work carried out to date to get to this stage and highlighted Cllr Michael Foxley's role who had met with Stewart Stevenson, Scottish Minister of Transport who then instructed Transport Scotland to accept the £40k and carry out the study.
- 8.2 Chief Inspector Matthew Reiss highlighted the issue that accidents and breakdowns on Berriedale Braes present significant safety issues due to the steep gradients and bends which have to be negotiated by tourists and other road users. Chief Inspector Matthew Reiss explained that the letter released by Transport Scotland explaining that the statistics on road accidents at Berriedale suggests that there is no need for improvements, is possibly misleading as whilst the statistics are correct and factual, the statistics do not represent the vast number of potential accidents that do take place which if could easily lead to something much more serious. He explained to the meeting that the true statistics of incidences recorded on Berriedale Braes would be too difficult a task to produce due to the way in which incidents are recorded.
 - 8.2.1 Chief Inspector Matthew Reiss also agreed with Cllr Flear's comments regarding the A9 being a life line route making this section of trunk route completely unique to any other part of the trunk road as there are no suitable diversions which demonstrates a very strong argument from the emergency services point of view and therefore could be justified in given a higher priority.
 - 8.2.2 Chief Inspector Matthew Reiss stated that the Berriedale Braes area produced more calls of different types than any other section in the north and in his opinion more than Drumochter, which is a significant modern section of the A9. He further stated that it was his professional opinion that Berriedale Brae is the most dangerous section of the A9.

- 8.3 Gordon Mackenzie, Scrabster Harbour Trust stated that the trust had recently met with three of the major oil companies and that all three companies had mentioned Berriedale Braes as a concern and a potential drawback to the Scrabster developments.
- 8.4 The Chairman raised the view on behalf of Mr Bill Mowat which was that it was Mr Mowat's view that the forum should be looking for a greater improvement to the Berriedale Braes than the re-alignment of the hairpin bend.
- 8.5 It was agreed to review the results of the study once they are made available and take a decision on the findings presented. It was agreed to request letters of support from Northern Constabulary to begin building evidence for the campaign. It was also acknowledged that the CTF has a petition drafted to lodge with Scottish Parliament should need arise.

<http://www.caithness-partnership.org.uk/files/downloads/download1525.pdf>

APPENDIX 2 – BRIEFING FOR TRANSPORT MINISTER

CAITHNESS TRANSPORT FORUM

A Transport Vision for Caithness

The Caithness Transport Forum aim to achieve a high quality inter-connected sea, road, air and rail network in order to put Caithness in a position to build the infrastructure needed to deliver increased economic activity, sustained employment and more diverse job opportunities.

The Caithness Transport Vision was produced in 2008 and was revised in 2009 and this document sets out the principal objectives of the Caithness Transport Forum. The realignment of the A9 Trunk Road at Berriedale Braes is a priority action.

Background

Councillors and representatives from public agencies had highlighted a need for a dedicated body to focus purely on transport issues (rail, road air and sea) to, from and within Caithness. The Caithness Partnership was asked to facilitate this need as the community planning partnership within the area. In 2006 the CTF was set up as a subgroup of the Caithness Partnership, although it has its own Aims & Standing Orders.

Why is there a need for a diversionary realignment at Berriedale Braes?

Socio-Economics:

Dounreay, the main income provider within Caithness is progressing towards its Interim End Stage, and an ongoing 'regeneration' of the area aims to replace lost jobs with new. The Caithness Chamber of Commerce, as the voice of the industries replacing Dounreay, has a number of members reliant on the A9, and is keen to see the difficult hairpin bend realigned as currently haulage is an ongoing concern. This has been noted at various meetings and I have attached an extract from the CTF minutes of 27.8.10, where Scrabster Harbour Authority noted that three major companies had mentioned Berriedale Braes as a potential drawback to the Scrabster developments. This is echoed by businesses already in the area that have to arrange haulage of huge components into Caithness e.g. Subsea7; and it is also likely to be problematical for prospective renewable energy companies considering relocating into the area.

The Caithness and North Sutherland Regeneration Partnership was established as a partnership of The Scottish Government, Highlands & Islands Enterprise, The Highland Council and the Nuclear Decommissioning Agency to help diversify the area economy away from its dependence on nuclear.

At a recent meeting with the Minister for Enterprise, Energy and Tourism the Partnership presented its priorities for the area in its "**Caithness & North Sutherland Action Plan 2011-14**", and in particular the potential of the energy sector (wave and tidal energy, offshore wind and oil & gas) to provide significant employment opportunities. Transport connectivity remains a key enabler for the future development of this Action Plan.

Safety:

This is a lifeline route for both Caithness and the Orkney Isles, and with over 70% of the traffic entering or leaving Caithness via the A9 Trunk Road, it is vital that safety is improved in order to see a reduction of accidents in the area. Northern Constabulary are aware of and support the need to realign and improve the Berriedale Braes section of A9 Trunk Road.

Reduction of Transport Time:

Each improvement made to the A9 Trunk road Thurso to Inverness will reduce the travel time for both public and private transport as per the STPR objective set in 2008.

Supporting Documents

Extract of Caithness Transport Forum Minutes 27.08.2010.
Sketch plan showing options for realigning Berriedale Braes North Hairpin.
List of Caithness Transport Forum members
Caithness Transport Vision (Revised 2009)

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Caithness Partnership
09.03.2011

APPENDIX 3 – PROPOSED RE-ALIGNMENT

