

# **TRANSPORT, INFRASTRUCTURE AND CLIMATE CHANGE COMMITTEE**

Tuesday 6 November 2007

Session 3

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## TRANSPORT, INFRASTRUCTURE AND CLIMATE CHANGE COMMITTEE

† 9<sup>th</sup> Meeting 2007, Session 3

### CONVENER

\*Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green)

### DEPUTY CONVENER

\*Cathy Peattie (Falkirk East) (Lab)

### COMMITTEE MEMBERS

\*Rob Gibson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)  
\*Charlie Gordon (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)  
\*Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con)  
\*Alison McInnes (North East Scotland) (LD)  
\*Shirley-Anne Somerville (Lothians) (SNP)  
\*David Stewart (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)

### COMMITTEE SUBSTITUTES

Alasdair Allan (Western Isles) (SNP)  
Gavin Brown (Lothians) (Con)  
John Park (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)  
Tavish Scott (Shetland) (LD)

\*attended

### CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Steve Farrell

### SENIOR ASSISTANT CLERK

Alastair Macfie

### ASSISTANT CLERK

Clare O'Neill

### LOCATION

Committee Room 6

† 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> Meetings 2007, Session 3—held in private.



## Scottish Parliament

### Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee

*Tuesday 6 November 2007*

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 14:01*]

### Subordinate Legislation

#### Road Traffic (Permitted Parking Area and Special Parking Area) (City of Edinburgh) Designation Amendment Order 2007 (SSI 2007/446)

**The Convener (Patrick Harvie):** Good afternoon and welcome to the ninth meeting in 2007 of the Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee. I remind everybody that mobile phones and pagers should be switched off.

Agenda item 1 is subordinate legislation. The Subordinate Legislation Committee has made no comments on the order and no comments or motions to annul have been received from members. Are there any views on the order?

**Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con):** Far be it from me to defend bus lanes, but I see nothing wrong with the order.

**The Convener:** That kicks us off on a consensual note. Do we agree to make no recommendation on the order?

**Members** *indicated agreement.*

## Petition

### Railway Infrastructure and Services (Inverness, Thurso and Wick) (PE894)

14:01

**The Convener:** Item 2 is a request to consider petition PE894, on the provision of rail services between Inverness, Thurso and Wick. Papers on the petition, including copies of maps, were circulated to members. I invite comment on the petition.

**Rob Gibson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP):** I have been involved in this issue for quite a while and I want to set it in a wee bit of context. We are discussing tier 3 developments that include speeding up the journey time between Perth, Aberdeen and Inverness during the period that the Government's plans cover. Those developments are obviously important because reducing the journey time by 45 minutes between Perth and Inverness would be excellent, especially as that would reduce the journey time to Edinburgh. That would bring the north of Scotland closer to the central belt and would mean that people could travel the route daily on business or whatever and generally use the trains more frequently, as the plans propose.

However, the plans have neglected the fact that the whole of Scotland has transport problems. For example, I note from certain submissions that people in south-west Scotland aspire to reopening the line between Stranraer and Dumfries. In addition, there is a misunderstanding about the importance to the Highlands of the economy of the far north, which is served by the line from Inverness to Thurso. That is why I thought that it would be a good idea to provide members with copies of a couple of maps.

The petition, which comes from community councils in Caithness, seeks to speed up the rail journey between Inverness and Thurso. I understand that the Highlands and Islands strategic transport partnership thinks that half an hour can be whipped off the time for the road journey between Caithness and Inverness. However, I find it difficult to understand that position. There are good safety reasons concerning speeds on that road that would make the HITRANS aim difficult to achieve, whereas investment on a greater scale in rail might reduce the journey time between Caithness and Inverness by considerably more than the reduction of three quarters of an hour that could be achieved by just crossing the Dornoch Firth.

We have had the same problem since the 1980s, when British Rail drew up a scheme for

such a crossing. The plans, which I have seen, included loads of level crossings, which would now be unacceptable; the economic circumstances have changed, too, since then. Without making too long a speech about it, I think that the reason why we should consider the subject of the petition—in a queue of developments—lies in the potential in the north of Scotland, which is mirrored in other areas.

Corus Rail Consultancy, which sorted out how Waverley station will work and worked on the scheme that will make the Borders rail line work—by having an express service from Edinburgh to the Borders and a stopping train thereafter—has been working privately on schemes for the Dornoch rail link action group in the far north. The action group works closely with the community councils in Caithness.

HITRANS and Highlands and Islands Enterprise have not entered the debate without a lot of baggage, which is such that HITRANS even thinks that no improvements in the north, apart from minor signalling improvements, would make any difference to the economy or be justifiable. We need to consider its response with caution.

It is worrying that, although Scott Wilson was asked in its report for HIE, which formed part of HIE's thinking, to consider the Dornoch link, it did not even take into account the idea of opening a station in Dornoch. It is incredible for a major report to ignore such a fundamental matter. Shortening the route would open up one of the golf capitals of the north. Another idea is running express trains from Inverness to Dornoch that would then stop on the way north.

The economics are that the benefit would be seen as marginal and it would be hard for the cost benefit ratio to reach 1 in some circumstances. On the map that I have provided, the first red dot at the bottom, below Alness, represents planning permission that has been granted for a loop that leads to a major deepwater pier. The Cromarty Firth Port Authority has plans for another loop about 7 miles north of Invergordon, towards Nigg.

Thurso leads to Scrabster and Wick. There is a strong case for using the railway for freight transport to and from harbours in Caithness—particularly Scrabster. One reason for that is the potential for huge renewables developments that is starting to stack up in the Pentland Firth. Another reason is that one fifth of Britain's proven oil reserves are north-west of Shetland and the nearest mainland base to service them is Scrabster—not Peterhead or Aberdeen. The oil companies are seriously considering that.

On top of that is the passenger argument, which is that about 50,000 people live north of the Dornoch Firth, if we include Orkney, but at the

behest of the Duke of Sutherland, the railway line went round to serve Lairg, so that he could have more line in his estate for trainspotting. Of course, Lairg must be served. A commuter service—the Invernet—now runs successfully between Lairg, Inverness and Kingussie.

Will people be prepared to travel by train in the future? Can we use the north railway to help business to develop? Should we consider that seriously as part of the queue for railway operations, in which we have a considerable interest?

I have given the reasons for raising the proposal. The red dots that I have put on the map that I have provided indicate only some of the ports that could use the railway for freight. Another issue is getting supermarket traffic off the roads, to reduce wear and tear on them. As such traffic is increasing, it ought to go by rail. That is a problem faced in common with many other parts of Scotland.

In that context, I suggest that the petition offers a chance to consider the matter afresh and to bring new evidence to bear. In the next few months, the equivalent of stage 1 of an appraisal under the Scottish transport appraisal guidance will be conducted privately and paid for by local people to try to make the case for the north of Scotland's railway system. Fundamentally, the counter-argument has been that a rail bridge across the Dornoch Firth would be far too expensive, because the whole signalling system would have to be changed. However, if a loop were created at Evanton, just south of Alness, the rickety and ancient radio electronic token block system, which is about 30 years old, would have to be changed. Such facilities must be changed in a modern railway system.

I know far too much detail about the subject, on which I am sure that I could bore for Scotland. People argued for crossrail services, which are important, and for the Bathgate to Airdrie line and the like, which affected areas with quite big populations. The train journey that we are discussing is the longest and slowest in Britain and it does not serve a large number of potential customers. We would have to find out whether they would travel by rail in future and whether people wanted to go there. In this era of climate change, we should seriously consider the proposal.

#### **David Stewart (Highlands and Islands) (Lab):**

I strongly support the points that Rob Gibson has made. If we could go back in time, it would have been ideal if we could have ensured that the bridge included a rail element when it was being constructed—that links closely to last week's arguments about the new Forth crossing—but we cannot go back in time to do that.

In my view, the Dornoch rail link and bridge have almost iconic status in the north of Scotland and are important for several reasons. The main reason—on this I agree with Stewart Stevenson—is that we need faster rail links north. I have already spoken on previous occasions on the importance of faster links to Inverness, but I would reinforce those arguments by saying that three things need to happen: first, we need improved signalling; secondly, we need a double track; and, thirdly, we need electrification. Those three things would all improve speed, which is vital. As Rob Gibson said, the situation gets worse north of Inverness.

Arguably, one reason why we need to speed up journey times is to secure the future of Dounreay. As members will be aware, Dounreay currently employs 1,800 people directly, with hundreds of other workers on top of that, but the decommissioning programme will result in major changes in employment. At a recent conference that I attended with Rob Gibson, speakers from all parties and none argued that we need a transport infrastructure upgrade. We need such an upgrade to support indigenous employment opportunities and to attract employers from outwith Scotland—and, indeed, from outwith Europe—into the area. Employers need good rail links, good road links and improved air services. I believe that providing an improved rail link will encourage employment in the area. I do not want to see another Invergordon smelter involving thousands of people being thrown on to the dole. We need improved infrastructure and investing in the rail link is one vital way of providing that.

I know that HITRANS takes a slightly different view, in that it believes that the money could be spent in a different and better way. I have a lot of respect for HITRANS, but I do not fully agree with it on that point.

I believe that it is important that we keep the dialogue on the petition going. I welcome the recommendation that we should ask the clerks to produce a further options paper for a future meeting. I support Rob Gibson. Let us keep the issue alive. I fully support the petition, but I would welcome other members' views.

**Cathy Peattie (Falkirk East) (Lab):** I support the recommendation that we should ask the clerks to produce a further options paper to consider what else we can do and whether the petition can be included in our work programme. It would be a shame to lose the issue, as it is obviously very important.

**The Convener:** Obviously, as members will be well aware, the committee needs to perform a bit of a balancing act on specific local projects. However, even if we disagree with a decision that has been made at a local level, we can consider

whether the decision ought to be made at the national level rather than at the local level.

Does Rob Gibson have any views on the recommendations on what we should do with the petition? I acknowledge the strength of feeling about the local issues, but does he have a view on the recommendations that have been suggested?

**Rob Gibson:** As far as I am concerned, it is important that people familiarise themselves with what is another one of those problems that have been intractable for too long. I am happy to accept the recommendation that we should ask the clerks to produce a further position paper on the issue. That would allow us to take a view on this as part of a queue. It should not jump the queue, but it should certainly be in the queue.

For people in Caithness who see the potential of their area, it is annoying that the proposal is dismissed as unimportant because there are said to be more important things to spend money on. Should a higher priority be given to a ring road around Inverness, where there are more people, or can a proposal that would provide the economy with huge amounts of potential be given serious consideration?

I hope that, once we have received a paper from the clerks, we can find a way to slot this issue in at some point when we are discussing the Government's major transport proposals.

**Alison McInnes (North East Scotland) (LD):** I support what Rob Gibson said and I believe that the issue merits more work. Perhaps we can widen out the issue by considering it not just as a local issue but as a serious issue to do with how we tackle peripherality. We should look at the wider issues that the petition raises. In addition, we might consider the role of transport projects in facilitating economic development in remote areas. If we could widen out the issue from being a little local project so as to explore some of those other areas, we might be able to look at it further.

14:15

**Alex Johnstone:** I support what Alison McInnes said. When I read the papers, I thought that the real problem was that HITRANS was treating the issue as a transport issue whereas I think that it is an economic development issue. There is a key role for us in taking a fresh look at it. The far north-east of Scotland has suffered economic deprivation and population drift for centuries. It is now showing a reversal of that trend. It is important that we make decisions that are based on economic development trends. That is why we might take a slightly different view from some of the agencies that have considered the issue already.

**The Convener:** The proposal in the paper is that we write to the Government to get its response to recent studies such as the “Room for Growth” strategy and the regional transport strategy. Do members think that we would be better able to sketch out our options once we get that information?

**Rob Gibson:** Yes, but we should also seek information from the private but respectable consultants.

**The Convener:** What is the timescale for that?

**Rob Gibson:** It will be before Christmas. Corus has produced an initial report, but it is working on the equivalent of stage 1 of a STAG appraisal.

**The Convener:** I hope that if we agree to write to the cabinet secretary or minister we will get their response within the same timescale. Are members content that we proceed in that way and reconsider the matter when we receive a reply?

**Members** *indicated agreement.*

## Ferry Links

14:17

**The Convener:** Item 3 is to consider an approach paper on an inquiry into ferry links to the islands. I seek members’ comments.

**David Stewart:** I thank the clerks for the paper, which is helpful and lays out the position clearly. As members will be aware, we discussed the prospect of an inquiry into ferry links first at our away day and then at a couple of our most recent committee meetings. It was thought important to have a strong rural element to our committee’s discussion and that either some or all committee members should go to Shetland, where there are the most difficulties in ferry transport, for a site visit.

I thought more about how we could ensure that any inquiry is representative. We should pick up the situation in the Western Isles and Arran, which has its unique problems. The clerks said that we could have a videoconference as part of our inquiry, but we cannot really do a ferries inquiry without going to the places that use ferries.

The paragraph on the terms of reference of the inquiry is comprehensive. I said in a question to the minister that one of the big issues with a road equivalent tariff is the problem with capacity. I support the principle of a road equivalent tariff. Of course we can increase demand—that is relatively easy—but the issue is how we create capacity.

We should perhaps consider the role of competition. I do not know whether other members agree, but I think that the inquiry should be about how we develop services for customers, islanders and people from elsewhere in Scotland and abroad. I do not see the inquiry as being about having a go at companies such as Caledonian MacBrayne and Western Ferries (Clyde) Ltd, which happen to be the developers of services. They have their role and I admire much of the work that they do.

There are problems, particularly in island communities, around the role that ferries have. They have a role in relation to tourism, cargo and the sustainability of rural communities. It is vital that we take information from the public. I agree with what the clerk said about that.

It will also be sensible to find out what the Government is doing. I strongly agree that there is no point in reinventing the wheel. However, I do not want this inquiry to go to sleep or, if I may mix my metaphors, be kicked into the long grass. The need for an inquiry is urgent.

The forthcoming legislation on climate change will be the biggest piece of Government legislation



and it will keep us extremely busy when it comes up. I therefore worry that, if we miss the present window, it will be hard to carry out an inquiry into ferries.

I am enthusiastic about our approach paper. The question is whether we should all be involved in the inquiry, or whether it should be led by just one or two of us. I am open-minded about that. In either case, the clerks will be able to advise and guide us.

**The Convener:** I take your point about asking the Government about its plans, as suggested in paragraph 12 of the paper. We are looking at a commitment in the national transport strategy to conduct a review. You are right to say that we do not want to reproduce work that is being done elsewhere, but if we get information about the scope and timescale of the Government's inquiry, that information might make us want to revise our plans and reconsider the extensive list of issues in paragraph 10.

**Alex Johnstone:** I endorse what David Stewart said about the importance of including competition issues within the terms of reference. Regardless of how we feel about the way the ferry industry has gone, it would be difficult and perhaps dangerous for the Government to commit itself to a road equivalent tariff without having any idea of the true cost of ferry services. The Government is committed to running a road equivalent tariff pilot.

It is important to have a viable commercial industry. We should therefore look into the role of competition in the provision of ferry services, and look into how competition can be effectively supported. I am thinking, for example, about the division of quay space and about the ownership of ferries and the services that they provide. There is still no transparency in the way in which we work out how much it costs to run a ferry service.

**Charlie Gordon (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab):** A distinct look into Scotland's ferry services is overdue. For many years, that has not been done, except in the context of other, land-based means of travel. However, I take the convener's point that we do not necessarily want to duplicate work that the Government might be about to undertake.

Our approach paper says that we might want to consult on the detail of the remit of an inquiry. That would be sensible. However, it is a slight misuse of language for the paper to mention ferry services "to the Scottish Islands". In several places, the paper mentions other services, such as the Gourock to Dunoon service. Dunoon is not on an island but on a peninsula. However, it is fairly remote by road, which is why ferry services are significant. Any amended draft of the paper should take that into account.

I would be up for looking into ferry services, but first we have to satisfy ourselves as to the scope of the Government's approach.

**Cathy Peattie:** I am happy with our approach paper; we should give it some priority. I am particularly interested in the programme or timetable. David Stewart raised the idea of using reporters, which I would support to a certain extent.

It is important that people who depend on ferries, and people who run them and work on them, should be able to give us their views. That could be done in some places through holding meetings that would be attended by a small number of committee members. It would also be worth while holding a full committee meeting in at least one or two places, to ensure that folk are aware of what the committee is doing and that we are able to hear and speak to local people about ferries. That might be difficult to organise, but it is important that we do not just sit in Edinburgh.

**Alex Johnstone:** The thought occurred to me that it might be possible to hold a committee meeting on a ferry.

**Cathy Peattie:** Absolutely—but on a calm day.

**The Convener:** What is the prospect for webcasting from a ferry?

Do members agree to write to the Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change to request the information that is outlined in the paper and to consider the inquiry's remit following the receipt of the response? At that point, we could ask the clerks to sketch out the options for using reporters.

**Members indicated agreement.**

**The Convener:** I ask the clerk what the process would be for consultation on the remit.

**Steve Farrell (Clerk):** The paper suggests various methods for that, including arranging reporter meetings, using the standard approach of consultation exercise via the website and, perhaps, drafting leaflets to be distributed on ferries and to passenger groups throughout Scotland to try to identify the issues. The suggestion is that we use a variety of techniques to elicit views on the remit.

**Rob Gibson:** When the Environment and Rural Development Committee carried out an inquiry on accessible rural areas, members went to parts of Scotland other than those that they represented, so that they could pick up something new. For example, I went to Fife. There is nothing at all alien about Fife, but it was good to get into a different place from one that I was used to, as that sharpens the mind. I have antecedents from Fife, so I know how to sup with a long spoon. It would

be good for our inquiry if the clerks considered such an approach, because it is a way of getting information from areas with fresh eyes.

**The Convener:** That is helpful.

Are members comfortable with the clerks bringing back that information in the timescale that is sketched out and considering locations for external meetings, mobile or not?

**Members** *indicated agreement.*

## Climate Change

14:27

**The Convener:** Item 4 is consideration of another approach paper, on pre-legislative activity in relation to climate change. Once again, we have a detailed paper and I ask for members' views.

**Alex Johnstone:** It is particularly important that we avoid any temptation to rush off and do or suggest something on a Scotland-only basis. It is important that whatever we do ties into the United Kingdom, European and, ideally, worldwide stage, because that is the nature of climate change and the fight that we need to put up against it. Therefore, the paper takes the right approach in suggesting that we have a broad base in our considerations.

**The Convener:** I feel strongly that, although there is already broad support for a domestic target-based approach, it does not make sense to think about that in isolation—the legislation will be within the context of the mechanisms at the European Union and UK levels.

**Alex Johnstone:** We in Scotland will have to play to our strengths, but we are playing a worldwide game.

**Rob Gibson:** It is important that we take a wide view and try to pick up as many approaches as possible. However, finally, we will have to consider the issues over which we have competence and discuss precisely what targets, if any, we will set and how we will get the 3 per cent yearly carbon reduction—we can contribute to that in many ways. The purpose of looking broadly is to find out about other approaches and then to reach concrete conclusions about how the Government might approach the matter. We must challenge the Government with ideas that are perhaps beyond those that people have already had. I hope that that will be our aim in taking that wider view.

**Cathy Peattie:** I am happy with the paper. I agree that we need to take a wide approach. As always when we are involved in proposed legislation, it is important that we check out what people in Scotland think and ensure that they have an opportunity to bring evidence, views and perhaps new ideas to the committee. The paper is a good starting point and I am happy to support it.

**Shirley-Anne Somerville (Lothians) (SNP):** I, too, think that the paper is a good one. It is important that we try seriously not to duplicate work, whether that is in other Parliaments, other committees, or the proposed cross-party group on climate change. Many people are considering the matter from different angles. It is important that the committee takes a strategic look at what is

happening in the round, in all the committees and Parliaments, and brings that back. The paper sets out that approach well.

There is potential for us to be innovative in our approach and in the groups that we involve. We have a good opportunity to broadcast the issue, put on a large event and be proactive in involving people. The paper is good.

**The Convener:** Do members agree to proceed on the basis of the proposals in paragraph 18 of the approach paper?

**Members** *indicated agreement.*

**The Convener:** Do members agree that I should approach the Conveners Group to request its approval for a visit?

**Members** *indicated agreement.*

**Alex Johnstone:** A low-carbon visit.

**The Convener:** It will be as low carbon a visit as we can possibly humanly manage.

*Meeting closed at 14:31.*



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