

Caledonian Canal Customer Forum 10.5.14

Venue: Eden Court Theatre, Inverness

Scottish Canals attendees:

Andrew Thin Chairman
Geoff Aitkenhead Board Member
Katie Hughes Director of Estates
Russell Thomson Waterway Area Manager, Caledonian Canal

1. Introduction by Andrew Thin, Scottish Canals' new Chairman, including Geoff Aitkenhead and Katie Hughes.

2. Katie Hughes gave an overview of the property and commercial developments planned, including SC's focus on creating destinations and hubs for use by locals and visitors. Key Caledonian areas of interest are:
 - a. Banavie – creating a tourism destination, maximising the Ben Nevis views, utilising the existing buildings to develop and activities hub with new businesses, retail and interpretive elements, and a redesigned car park. All linking to Scottish Scenic Routes pilot project. Currently seeking funding.
 - b. Fort Augustus – have secured funding from SSE for redeveloping the Caledonian Canal Visitor Centre which will be triple existing size with retail and perhaps a café, supported by 5 retail pods again creating an activities hub, increasing dwell time and length of season for the village.
 - c. Muirtown – recently undertaken planning charrettes with communities looking at long term development of Basin. Plans may include floating water sports hub, improved walking links, new Scouts base, wakeboarding, floating homes, a café and parking for Titanic museum.

Q How will you avoid conflict with needs of large vessels?

A SC is aware of this issue and will maintain adequate passage line, passing room and turning space for large craft. Seeking to maximise overall capacity of basin, especially at quiet times.

Q Sea Scouts have 7 or 8 boats abandoned at Dochgarroch using income generating space.

A SC is developing a commercial focus and is looking at all use of the waterspace and charging, including for charities. SC values what charities can offer the community but there may need to be some rationalisation.

Q Query regarding vehicle access to residential berths at Seaport Marina and the quality of the marina's paths and towpath.

A Land has been secured from Highland Council on Carsegate Road for parking and storage. There are some legal and planning issues that have caused delays. The towpath is the responsibility of Brian MacKenzie Joinery.

Katie Hughes continued her presentation –

- Living on Water, SC's residential moorings project has been largely Lowlands focussed and a new PR campaign will soon begin.
- SC is working in a joint venture with Gaelforce to develop new floating homes which may be on or off-grid. Planning applications have been made for Clachnaharry, Kytra and Aberchalder.
- SC's new bothies will be rolled out to Fort Augustus, Laggan Locks, Kytra and Gairloch during 2014 / 2015. The basic camping bothy will accommodate 4 people and will be approx. £30 - £35 per night. Higher specification 'glamping' bothies accommodating 2 people will cost more.

Q Concern was expressed about the bothies' woodburners and where campers would find wood to burn.

A There will be an on-site manager and a wood store which will be replenished. SC is developing a concierge service for its bothies and holiday cottages.

Q Will there be water for boaters at Kytra?

A Yes there is currently a project to upgrade the water supply to both Culloch and Kytra.

Katie Hughes continued her presentation –

- A design competition is underway for new road visitor facilities at Laggan Locks as part of the Scottish Scenic Routes project. They should be in place by March 2015.
- SC has been investing significantly in its canalside properties to turn them into holiday cottages. Initially a joint venture with Vivat Trust, now managed in-house. 7 cottages have brought in c£170k. Bona Lighthouse is currently being renovated into two holiday cottages and will be ready for letting by Christmas 2014.
- SC is developing a line of products including a new, specially commissioned tweed, used for a variety of goods on sale in our Visitor Centres and online.

Q There was concern that boater facilities, particularly water and electricity, were being neglected despite boaters contributing most financially.

A SC is constantly trying to deliver core functions, such as boaters facilities, and we have been bidding for money and have installed several facility blocks and pontoons in the last 15 years. Approx 90% of moorings have access to electricity but many of our pontoons and other boater infrastructure is now reaching an age where it needs more maintenance and both financial and technical resources are an issue. SC has a steady grant from the Scottish government but rising costs.

Q Gairloch can be so busy with campers that they are sometimes camping in the toilet block.

A SC is seeking government funding to convert Telford House into a bunkhouse. Bothies are also planned to be installed here. Access to the toilet blocks will be reviewed following the piloting of swipe card entry systems.

Q There is no pump out at Muirtown Basin, only one at the top of the lock flight. A mobile unit may be a solution.

A Key services still need to be improved and there is a project underway to assess options. The marina is on a septic tank and mains connection for the pump out and facility block would be approx. £90k.

Q The pump out at Fort Augustus is regularly broken and hire boaters find it difficult to get service.

A We will check with the local team and ensure that they recognise needs but we ask that hire boats are emptied during their turnaround service.

3. Russell Thomson gave a brief review of the 2013 season, including increasing numbers of visiting boats and paddlers, a series of water and land-based events, the replacement of navigation markers in Loch Oich, gate ram refurbishments, phase 1 electrical upgrade of Muirtown swing bridge, upgrade to water and power supplies at Laggan Locks, hydraulic pipework upgrade at Gairloch and pontoon refurbishment at Laggan and Gairloch.

Plans for the 2014 season were discussed such as redecking the Muirtown top jetty, installing 3 phase power at Banavie, refurbishing and replacing pontoon sections, towpath repairs, routing M&E refurbishments, phase 2 of Culloch and Kytra water supply upgrade and the 'Dochgarroch loop' towpath improvements.

4. A short question and answer session followed:

Q The fingers on the pontoons at Gairloch are bad in poor weather.

A SC is refurbishing and repairing existing pontoons and seeking to improve the pontoon offer at a number of sites, but there are some issues particular to Gairloch.

Q Access for disabled people and those with mobility problems is bad at Gairloch. Is it possible to change the pontoon steps for ramps, particularly nearest the facility block?

A SC's successful disability equality forum has fallen by the wayside in recent years. There has been a disability audit of Caledonian boater facilities by one of our disabled customers. A social enterprise specialising in accessible watersports will be carrying out a trip in July / August and will also audit canal facilities.

Q Further disabled access hoists shouldn't be installed as they are too scary to use.

A SC has been disappointed in the level of use of the existing hoists.

Q The Great Glen Canal Users Association feels that issues get mentioned in the canal office and that nothing happens afterwards.

A The Caledonian team gets a lot of input from a wide variety of customers and stakeholders, and we simply can't deliver everything. There is a focus on consolidating what is already there – the more we install, the more we must maintain.

Q Access should be considered whenever upgrades are planned.

A It is a requirement for all new builds and a consideration during every refurbishment.

Q A request was made for more ramps to allow trolley access for small boats.

A The volume of demand has been from the paddle market and funding was available to install facilities for them. The canal has enquiries from only a small number of small boats each year and limited launching facilities are already available.

Q Concerns were raised about the customer trolleys and lighting at Seaport Marina.

A SC will hold a separate meeting to discuss issues relating to residential boaters.

Q MV Eala Bhan is sunk and degrading in Loch Oich. She allegedly contains 500 gallons of oil and may be a pollution risk.

A Russell Thomson gave some background to the situation and advised that SC had received expressions of interest in raising and removing the vessel. It was extremely unlikely that there were significant amounts of fuel on board the vessel.

Q Information was requested about the future of the Scot II.

A SC was pleased when the Scot II trust was formed a few years ago that they had the technical expertise and funding to support the refurbishment of the vessel. SC assisted the trust in finding fittings from the vessel. The Scottish Waterways Trust attempted to find funding for the trust but none was available. SC currently receives no income for the vessel's berth at Fort Augustus. There has been no news from the Scot II trust for some time. A site between Fort Augustus and Kytra has been identified for potentially moving Scot II and dumb barge Muriel, to release their berths for other uses.

George Nixon offered to assist in restarting the Scot II project.

There is potential that UHI may wish to become involved. Katie Hughes advised it may be possible to seek funding from SSE as a phase 2 funding bid for the Fort Augustus area. Katie Hughes

asked Russell Thomson to arrange a meeting for them both with the Scot II trust.

Q What is happening at Foyers?

A The design work has been done for some new moorings and pier stabilisation works. Costs came in at £120k to complete the works and funding was secured from SSE, SC and Highland Council. However, prices have now doubled to £220k and there will be a project meeting with HC in June.

Q Highland Wi Fi charges are more expensive than BT Wi Fi because used to get BT Wi Fi free if you had a home wi fi account with them.

A BT Wi Fi withdrew at short notice from all its marina sites around the UK in the summer of 2013. Highland Wi Fi were able to provide a replacement high speed wi fi service at all 18 SC sites at no cost to SC. Their charges are less than BT Wi Fi, although this obviously doesn't apply if you had been a BT home wi fi customer in the past.

5. The Forum was closed with a thank you from Andrew Thin, who advised that the more users the canal network can attract, ashore and afloat, the more political support SC would receive.