

Caledonian Canal Customer Forum 30.5.15

Venue: Eden Court Theatre, Inverness

Scottish Canals attendees:

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| Andrew Thin | Chairman |
| David Lamont | Operations Director |
| Katie Hughes | Estates and Commerce Director |
| Josie Saunders | Head of Corporate Affairs |
| Russell Thomson | Caledonian Canal Waterway Area Manager |

1. Welcome and introduction by Andrew Thin, Scottish Canals' Chairman.
2. Katie Hughes gave an overview of the property and commercial developments being planned and undertaken on the Caledonian Canal in order to grow the tourism business. These included:
 - a. 16 holiday cottages with 60% occupancy, bringing an average of £1000 per week spend.
 - b. Refurbishment of Visitor Centre at Fort Augustus into an interpretive shop – this is now open. Phase 2 in 2016 will see a new café and retail pods, alongside an activity hub promoting canal-related products.
 - c. Scottish Scenic Routes initiative development of viewing platform and grab & go café at Laggan Locks, with glamping pods and camper van parking within car park which was previously owned by Highland Council.
 - d. Camping pods with 2 levels of offer – basic for paddlers, walkers etc and glamping, for more luxury. Will be sited at Gairloch, Laggan, Kytra and Fort Augustus.
 - e. Banavie, Scenic Routes initiative development of Ben Nevis viewing platform, activity centre, interpretive shop, car park with camper van facilities and a new lockside café at the Moorings Hotel.
 - f. Gairloch, installing 6 camping pods, formalising the informal lockside camping, reopening the tea room, new moorings and fundraising to find the £500k+ required to open Telford House as accommodation for Wayfarers.
 - g. Muirtown Basin, following planning charrettes, linking the Basin and Merkinch with the city centre in an improved way, creating an activity hub including the Scouts and wakeboarding and tying in with Highland Council's bid for Green Infrastructure funding.

3. David Lamont gave an update on the canal breach at Culloch which occurred on Sunday 8th March as a result of exceptionally high water levels; advising that repairs are expected to cost in the region of £1.3million. Many stakeholders were affected, such as SSE, fisheries, commercial operators, leisure boaters, waterside businesses, SEPA, Transport Scotland, Highland Council. The vulnerability and requirement to adapt the SC canal and reservoir network in the light of climate change are an important future consideration.
4. Russell Thomson gave an update on the previous year's activities on the Caledonian Canal, including user statistics, maintenance works that had been carried out in each of the canal's districts and by the maintenance team, the impact of the recent breach on boating traffic, canal events, and ending with a warning to boaters about misplaced red marker buoys on Loch Ness which had been installed by a private business but were about to be replaced with SC assistance.
5. Josie Saunders informed those present about the World Canals Conference, which will be on the Caledonian Canal in Inverness from 19th – 22nd September 2016. SC is working with Red Bull to develop a Loch Ness event to precede the conference, and a short video of the recent Red Bull Neptune's Steps event at Maryhill was shown.
6. A Question and Answer session followed:

Q Nothing in the presentations mentioned customers, moorings or maintenance of facilities. Facilities are used by others who don't contribute towards them.

A Facility block repairs are done by a contractor called SPIE, with whom there have been some difficulties, which we are discussing with them. Minor issues are resolved by the local Ops teams. Walkers, cyclists and paddlers are charged for access and last year brought in c£6k, unfortunately access legislation means we can't charge for reasonable unpowered access to our land or water. SC accepts that it may have neglected some of the smaller issues and asked for issues to be noted on the flipchart at the front of the room.

Q Last year there was an issue with the pump outs on the canal, and at one point none was working and customers had to pump out at Caley Marina.

A We have been aware of some issues with the reliability of the pumps and will ensure that they are repaired and functioning.

Q There was some concern about a lack of grass cutting adjacent to the moorings at Dochgarroch.

A SC strives to find a balance between keeping the grass and vegetation at mooring locations trimmed, whilst preserving habitats for wildlife and maintaining biodiversity. Comments from customers and the public support both circumstances, often in the same sites. It would also be too costly to have contractors or staff cut all the canalside grass regularly throughout the year.

Q SC appears to be being distracted by non-canal related projects when they should be focussing on delivery of canal projects, for instance the new layby view point over Loch Ness.

A The layby is part of the Scottish Govt Scenic Routes project and is in partnership with other organisations including the TBID. SC can contribute to the project and has received funding for 2 sites on the Caledonian Canal – Laggan and Banavie.

Q Loyal boating customers are feeling neglected as SC appears to have other spending priorities, particularly at the Falkirk Wheel and the Kelpies.

A Money can often be ring-fenced by funders for specific projects, eg: towpath resurfacing at Dochgarroch was funded by Sustrans for walkers and cyclists, meaning Dochgarroch West was not prioritised and SC staff had to make repairs themselves. CCTV at Seaport Marina will be a lower priced, new non-industrial system. In 2014 the Falkirk Wheel contributed £600k to SC's income.

Q The proposed licence price rises for Caley Marina customers was queried.

A Some background to the proposal was given – increasingly greater use of SC waters and facilities, a desire for fairness against transiting customers. Has been resolved with Caley Marina and seeking to find a balance for future.

Q Improvements to the canal in recent years have been very good, particularly staff attitude, and support need to increase revenue but plea not to forget community groups who don't use all the facilities but need the canal eg: Sea Cadets. Request for floating slipway at Banavie.

A Recognise use of the canal by community groups, eg: Sea Scouts at Muirtown bring over 10k hours' use of the water each year.

Q Request some locks be open later during the lighter summer months.

A Familiar request. Unlikely to be accommodated within existing staff budget and rota (already working a 10 hour day during the summer) but may consider user-operation of automated structures. Some Lowland Canals user groups have been trained to use some structures out of hours. Special lockings are already available for a fee.

Q Has SC considered hydro generation as a revenue generator?

A This has been reviewed with Scottish Water and although good in principle, the finances don't stack up given the relatively limited amount of water that can be drawn. Banavie is most likely (possibly in 2018) but links to electricity grid are poor and selling to community or use of power on site is limited. Currently charging developers in the Lowlands to accept surface water drainage.

7. Russell Thomson thanked everyone for attending and invited them to take lunch.