

Notes of Caledonian Canal Customer Forum 14.5.16

Venue: Alexandra Hotel, Fort William

Scottish Canals attendees:

Russell Thomson, Head of Customer Operations

Josie Saunders, Head of Corporate Affairs

Mark Smith, Head of Projects

Ailsa Andrews, Customer Operations Manager, Caledonian Canal

1. Welcome and introduction by Ailsa Andrews
2. Russell Thomson gave an overview of Customer Operations across the Scottish Canals network. This included:
 - Flat £10m Scottish Government grant for 2016 /2017
 - Own income generated has grown
 - Income split by type for 2015/2016
 - Caledonian Canal annual income and expenditure 2015 / 2016
 - Management of assets and £50m maintenance backlog – discussions with Scottish Government are ongoing
 - Boat transit numbers across Scotland
 - Volunteering in the Lowlands
 - Dredging in the Lowlands – upskilling staff, achieving more on the ground and saving money
 - Four-day operation of western reaches of Forth & Clyde Canal
 - Closure of Crinan’s Dunardry bridge and change of delivery for assisted passage scheme
3. Ailsa Andrews gave an overview of the Caledonian Canal’s recent performance. This included:
 - Review of Cullochry embankment breach
 - >£1m investment from Sustrans in upgrading canal’s towpaths
 - Review of works completed in each of the canal’s three districts and by the maintenance team
 - A look at the season ahead
4. Josie Saunders outlined a number of items, which included:

- The licensing and mooring pricing consultation process, with proposals from the independent consultants due to be published for public consultation shortly.
 - The World Canals Conference is being hosted by Scottish Canals on the Caledonian Canal 19-22nd September 2016. Main venue will be Eden Court theatre, Inverness.
 - Red Bull Neptune's Steps adventure event took place at Maryhill Locks in Glasgow in April. There were 200 participants chosen from >3000 international applicants.
 - Scottish Canals is currently cleansing the information it holds on customers, and future correspondence will be issued by email for efficiency and cost saving.
 - A summary of some of the international press coverage received by Scottish Canals over recent months was shown.
5. Mark Smith gave a presentation outlining SC's commercial activities, including:
- 16 holiday cottages
 - A nodal development strategy along the Caledonian Canal, developing activity hubs
 - Developing new and existing commercial operators on the water
 - Creating a new visitor attraction in Fort Augustus at the McVeans site
 - Laggan Scenic Routes project – camping bothies and café open end May
 - Planning consents for further bothies along the canal
 - Developing a new visitor destination at Banavie, linking to Gairloch
 - Scenic routes plans – new installation of 'shiny box' at Neptune's Staircase

Q & A Session

1. Are there plans for extra moorings on Loch Ness?
Russell advised on funding challenges for Foyers Pier – local community trust and Highland Council don't feel able to take on the risk of maintaining and operating the pier. They would prefer a slipway but SC has explained the associated risks. Moorings at Invermoriston could be installed by the local community with wind farm income. SC would collaborate.
2. Is the Muriel barge being moved from the pontoon at Dochgarroch?
Ailsa confirmed that it is there temporarily and will move as soon as weather and availability of staff and MV Selby coincide.
3. Query re: reduced office opening hours at Seaport Marina and possibility of diverting phones to Glasgow. Ailsa advised about recent changes in staff and reduced hours during training period. Office hours would revert to near normal by the end of May.

4. Query re: decking on jetty at top of Muirtown Locks.
Ailsa advised that The Scottish Waterways Trust was in the second stages of a lottery funding bid to introduce a 'Canal College' in Inverness. If the bid is successful, the jetty will be part of this project.
5. Query re: plans for Caley Inn at Muirtown Locks following commercial offer to create photographic unit and café being turned down and the building remaining empty.
Query if someone available at weekends for viewing.
Russell advised that a member of the local team could provide access following prior arrangement with Estates team.
6. What are the plans for celebrating the 200th anniversary of the Caledonian Canal in 2022? Josie said that there would be events but there is no detail as yet. Russell said that a flotilla event was a possibility.
7. Caledonian Discovery asked about details of their Sail Caledonia event being uploaded on the SC website – first requested two months ago.
Josie promised to investigate and expedite. (Post forum note – info could not be uploaded until final event documentation received from event organisers).
8. What is the tendering mechanism that SC uses for renovation and building projects?
Quotes come in very high, are SC getting best value for money?
Mark advised that as a public body SC needs to adhere to Scottish Govt procurement process, using their portal, and SC goes through detailed preliminary works. SC never goes to minimum price or cuts corners. SC was challenged over £200k 'real world' job price that cost up to £600k via Govt procurement process.
9. Can today's presentations go on the SC website for others to see?
Josie and Russell agreed to arrange this.