

## **Notes of Caledonian Canal User Group Meeting 21.4.18**

Venue: Lochardil House Hotel, Inverness

Scottish Canals' attendees:

Russell Thomson      Head of Customer Operations

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, including:
  - Challenges such as aging assets, reducing budgets, rising expectations & increasing demand. Increase in recent years of earned income was obviously good news but still a £6m-£9m per annum shortfall in respect of asset management.
  - Serious issues with bridges in the Lowlands, including Bonnybridge and Twechar which are currently out of action. Partial collapse of Ardrishaig Pier, major engineering works required to Ness Weir, lock gates and sink holes at Kytra Lock
  - Description of project to rebuild and improve Ardrishaig Pier – protects and increases Scottish Canals' timber freight income and reduces transport by road.
  - Confirmation of new lock gates for Kytra (£350k) – ready for delivery. Installation timing and methodology to be confirmed
  - Outline new Caledonian developments partially funded – Carse Watersports Hub in Inverness & Thomas Telford Corpach Marina
  - New Canal Centre at Fort Augustus due to open imminently – shop, café, interpretation & rooms to rent. Major investment for SC and supported by £300k of Coastal Community funding.
  - Preparations underway with Highland Council, Highlands and Islands Enterprise and Visit Scotland to celebrate Caledonian's bicentenary in 2022.
3. Ailsa Andrews gave an overview of the previous year on the Caledonian Canal and expectations for 2018 and beyond:
  - Visiting boat numbers were up 14% in 2017 to 1337, approx 30% of those visitors were from overseas (mainly northern Europe), there was a significant increase in income from commercial operators in 2017 to £272k which was up 30% on the previous year and 68% on two years ago
  - At the request of a customer, a breakdown of the Caledonian Canal's income and expenditure was given. The canal raises approx 41% of its operating costs.

- The Ness Weir project was described : £2 million, main works carried out July – Sept, very strict environmental stipulations to protect the water course and the fishery.
- Dredging carried out on high spots at Dochfour Burn and Moy Bridge – Ness Weir project barge used to reduce costs.
- Jacobite Cruises have built a new wharf at Dochgarroch which reduces the impact on navigation in and out of the lock past their large vessel
- European Waterways introduced a second hotel barge, called Spirit of Scotland
- Cruise Loch Ness have a new, large trip boat called Spirit of Loch Ness for their Ft Augustus operation
- There were a number of TV programmes filmed on and around the canal in 2017 including ITV's The Loch, BBC's The One Show, Channel Four's Coastal Railways and Channel Four's Biggest Little Railway. Scottish Canals charges for filming and are actively promoting the canal for future filming.
- A breakdown of some of the third party events using the canal in 2017 – again, SC charges to recoup costs of ensuring these are held safely and with minimal impact on other users
- Challenges in 2017 fell largely into two categories – toilets and bridges
  - i. Seaport Marina's septic tank and soakaway failed at the end of July and protracted efforts have been made since then to install an alternative system. The plan is now to connect to the mains sewer with work starting at the end of April / beginning of May. Refunds to reflect the reduced service are being approved by directors and will be with Seaport berth holders in June.
  - ii. Laggan Locks facility block was closed for some time during the summer due to the soakaway being blocked by flushed wipes. A new soakaway had to be constructed.
  - iii. Dochgarroch facility block was overwhelmed last summer by volume of use by members of the public and trip boat / bus customers. Restricting the facilities to boaters led to antisocial toileting around the village, so SC opened them to all and Jacobite Cruises contributed to extra cleaning. For 2018, as Jacobite's new visitor centre with toilets is still being built, they have leased x2 portaloos for general use and the SC facilities will be restricted to boaters.
  - iv. Banavie rail bridge was increasingly unreliable last year, causing at least 5 canal closures. Network Rail undertook winter maintenance to address this issue.
  - v. Muirtown bridge gear box broke during Inverness's period of busiest road use (Belladrum and Black Isle Show). Bridge could only be operated to release trapped boats by winding it manually – this had to be done at midnight to minimise disruption to road users. The

excellent emergency response provided by the Caledonian Canal's maintenance team was appreciated by all.

- vi. 2017 saw an increasing bloom of New Zealand pigmy weed – an invasive aquatic species. It is not currently affecting navigation but is spreading in the eastern reaches of the canal. It is extremely difficult to eradicate and spreads when broken. SC is working with University of Highlands and Islands on a pilot project to trial control methodologies.
- There are a number of things to look forward to in 2018:
  - i. A promotional 'roadshow' to Northern Irish yacht clubs
  - ii. A free Great Glen Ways app
  - iii. The mains sewer connection for Seaport Marina
  - iv. A new trip boat at Dochgarroch for Jacobite Cruises
  - v. Public toilets at Dochgarroch – funded by Highland Council, LEADER and Jacobite Cruises
- Future projects include the new Inverness West Link swing bridge. Construction due to begin mid Nov 2019 (involves draining section of canal at Tomnahurich) with deck installation overnight or in 1 day summer 2020. Exact details to be confirmed. Also working with Highlands and Islands Enterprise to develop a long term investment plan for canal infrastructure to support local economic development

#### 4. Q & A session

- Why is Scottish Canals involved in the pier project on the Crinan Canal?

SC owns the pier and timber freight is a source of income. Pier is part of a wider development on the Crinan Canal at the old Gleaner site and with the new Steamer Terminal café & shop.

- What has happened to assisted passage at Crinan now that Yot Spot has closed?

Boaters should contact the Crinan Canal office, who will give them details of a number of local 'pilots' who can provide an assistance service.

- At last year's customer forum Mark Smith said that empty buildings have no costs for Scottish Canals. However, a FOI request demonstrated that SC paid £78k in rates on empty properties. SC leaves many buildings empty when they could be rented eg: old Caley Inn. SC is stifling business.

SC has had some successes on the Caledonian Canal eg: Kiltane renting old Visitor Centre in Ft Augustus and Rockhopper renting building at Banavie. As

no members of SC's estates department were present at the meeting, Ailsa Andrews undertook to ask them to reply directly to the customer.

- What evidence of insurance is required of boats only transiting the canals, as long term berth holders must provide a copy of their insurance certificate?

Skippers of transiting boats are being asked to show their insurance certificates to the sea lock keepers on arrival at the canal. Those details are then transferred to the licence. If the skipper doesn't have the details with them, the boat will be held until it can be provided.

- Why hasn't there been a meeting for residential boaters? There are a number of residential issues to raise.

Ailsa Andrews undertook to ask the estates team to contact residential berth holders regarding a meeting.

- Some of the vessels berthing on pontoon 7 at Seaport Marina are running generators all night. This is causing noise pollution and diesel fumes. Some of the hotel boats based on the canal are a particular problem.

Skippers of large craft on transit are given 'be a good neighbour' leaflets to remind them that generators may only be run from 8am – 8pm. Hotel boat operators are aware of this too. Ailsa Andrews advised that she would remind the hotel boat operators of the permitted hours to run generators.

- Please can electric gates be considered for installation at Seaport Marina?

Given the many other demands on SC's budgets, it is extremely unlikely that SC would ever consider electric gates for the marina a priority.

- The road at the gate at the far end of Seaport Marina is in very poor condition.

SC has attempted to improve the drainage in the area and will see if minor remedial work can be carried out but in reality it requires larger scale work which may possibly form part of the Carse Watersports Hub project.

- Can the vehicle / pedestrian gate currently sited behind the Seaport Marina building be relocated to beyond the turning area?

Ailsa Andrews agreed to speak to the local Supervisor to see if this would be a possibility.

- Why is there no CCTV at the Dochgarroch moorings?

SC would normally only install CCTV in areas with police reports of repeated crime.

- Members of the public are walking along the pontoons at Dochgarroch and chains previously installed to prevent this are in disrepair.

The moorings at Dochgarroch, and many other canal sites, are accessible to the public. Where there was agreement in the past to install chains on the walkways to prevent this access, they were largely unused.

- Have we been contacted about a sunken yacht at Cherry Island?

Ailsa Andrews confirmed that the Fort Augustus and Glenmoriston Community Council had been in touch with SC and we had been able to confirm details of the last person to purchase a canal licence for the vessel.

- Why do Jacobite vessels switch off their AIS systems when they come into the canal? They have been speeding again recently – going past the weir at 5.4 knots.

After issues last year, an independent piece of work had been commissioned which led to the introduction of a large craft operating protocol and it had been witnessed that speeding by Jacobite vessels, and others, had declined. Russell Thomson advised that he would bring to Jacobite's attention that this has been raised as a recent issue at the Customer Forum. Ailsa Andrews advised that large craft on transit are also given a copy of the protocol, so they are aware of the speed limits in the canal.

- Some of the larger hire boats are speeding past moored craft at Dochgarroch, as are Royal Navy boats, lifeboats etc

Ailsa Andrews confirmed that she would contact the hire boat operators to remind them to include this in their training, and also for the sea lock keepers to remind large boats on transit about speeding. Transiting vessels found speeding are held back at the next lock to remove any time advantage.

- A customer had witnessed the Jacobite Queen passing very close to his moored boat at Dochgarroch.

Russell Thomson asked for confirmation of a date and time of the incident, so that he could raise it with Jacobite. *Post meeting note: this information was provided.*

- There was a discussion about an incident in 2017 where a large craft on transit struck two moored leisure boats. The skipper thought he had struck a high point on the canal bed. Can Scottish Canals release insurance details of boats involved in these types of incident?

Ailsa Andrews confirmed that it would normally fall to the owners of the boats to correspond in these circumstances but SC would provide any assistance it could, including releasing insurance details. *Post meeting note: Point 2.11 of the Licence T&Cs states 'You agree that we may provide your name and address to any person (or the insurer of any person) that we believe has an interest in an incident or alleged incident involving the Boat and where personal injury or damage to property may have occurred.'*

It was agreed that SC would arrange for soundings to be taken of the canal bed in the area of the incident.

- What was SC's thinking behind the new visitor centre at Fort Augustus?

It was to raise income from non-boaters and to increase Scottish Canals' land-based presence in the village.

- Why is one of the rooms for rent disabled accessible when all the rooms can only be reached via a flight of stairs?

As there was no member of the estates team present at the meeting, Ailsa Andrews undertook to seek an answer and come back to the questioner. *Post meeting note: the provision of a fully accessible room recognises that not all with access issues would necessarily be unable to use the stairs. It also provides 'future proofing' in the event that all abilities access to the 1<sup>st</sup> floor be installed in the years to come.*

- Can the hire boat operators remind their customers to follow the buoys correctly? About a week ago, three Caley hire boats all sailed the wrong side of the buoys at Bona / SSE weir.

Russell Thomson advised that the hire boat companies have very good skipper's guides for their hirers but that SC would advise them of this incident.

- Do the hire boaters get instruction on how to go through a lock chamber?

Both hire companies give hands on training and video briefings to their hirers. Caley Cruisers also have a staff member accompany their boats through the lock at Dochgarroch.

- With the mains sewer connection at Seaport Marina, will there be a new pump out facility?

Ailsa Andrews advised that she had requested this as part of the project, but it will depend on the final cost of the overall scheme. At the very least, it will provide a future opportunity to put in pump out facilities.

- If SC is looking for income, there are lots of boats moored on the lochs but they can't have an annual licence.

Ailsa Andrews confirmed that boaters on the lochs can purchase up to two 30 day Explorer licences each year, which would allow them access to the canal.

- Long term berth holders must have a Boat Safety certificate. What happens with transiting boats?

Russell Thomson advised that approx 10% of visiting boats are subject to random safety checks at the Sea Locks using calibrated gas monitors.

- If a boat doesn't have a gas system does it still require a Boat Safety certificate?

Ailsa Andrews suggested that the customer follow the Boat Safety 'flowchart' available from the canal office – this indicates the triggers for a Boat Safety examination.

- There was going to be a new marina between the West Link bridges in Inverness. What has happened to that?

Russell Thomson confirmed that although SC had suggested the creation of a marina between the two swing bridges, on examination it had proved unviable economically because of the additional development costs against the relatively small number of berths it could accommodate. There will be sufficient berths for large and small craft between and at either side of both bridges to facilitate safe passage.

- What is happening to the old hulk berthed at the top of Fort Augustus? It's such a busy place and it's taking up a lot of space. Does it pay for a mooring?

Russell Thomson confirmed that the Scot II hull was allowed back into the canal for a free mooring as it was to be rebuilt as part of a community project. Unfortunately that project has not progressed. Ailsa Andrews advised that she had been in touch with the project leader last year but progress on the vessel had been delayed through illness. He will be contacted again as the water space and mooring are much in demand.