

Attendance

Paul Gunning, Ailsa Andrews, Alan Dykes, Colin Hall, Josie Saunders, Russell Thomson, Richard Millar, Helen Cunningham, Jo Spragg, James Stuart, Jane Campbell Morrison, Tor Justad, John Coe, Hagen Wagner, Chris Holdstock, Tracey Holdstock, Mike Salter, Jay Cresswell.

Introduction

Josie and Russell welcomed everyone on behalf of Scottish Canals, thanking everyone for attending and outlined that the decision was made to combine the Caledonian and Crinan Canal User Group meetings into a single remote video conference due to Covid-19 restrictions.

Corporate Overview

Richard Millar provided an overview of Scottish Canals activities from Corporate Standpoint.

The presentation focused on the work carried out by all involved, particularly between July – October 2020, in order for the canals to be in an operational state, in addition to a preview of planned works schedules for the Crinan & Caledonian Canals.

Scottish Canals' recent change of status to Non-departmental Public Body was also highlighted, accompanied by leadership changes with the departures of Katie Hughes and Claire Lithgow and the arrivals of Lindsey McNeill (director of Corporate Services) and David Blair (Director of Revenue & Regeneration and acting director of Policy & Governance).

See slides for full information.

Operational Updates

Russell Thomson presented an Operational Update on the Highland Canals as per the attached slides ([Link to slides](#)).

- **Review of 2020 Summer Season**
Ailsa Andrews provided update as per the attached slides ([Link to slides](#)).
- **Customer Operations & Winter Works**
Mark Robertson presented an update on Customer Operations and Winter Works as per the attached slides ([Link to slides](#)).

Marketing & Communications Updates

Josie Saunders presented an update on Marketing & Communications activities as per the attached slides ([Link to slides](#)).

Q&A + Comments

Q: Are there plans for winter closures on the Caledonian Canal next winter (2021-22)?

A: This is dependent on government funding, but if a similar level of funding is received,

Q: Did Scottish Canals apply for Government aid?

A: Where possible, yes. As a government organisation, avenues are limited here, but Furlough was a significant route taken.

Q: Did any boaters receive a discount aside from the boating license?

A: We reached out to people on a one-to-one basis to see what kind of support they might need. Specific details beyond this contain commercially sensitive information and can't be shared publicly.

Q: Why are there so many vacant moorings at Seaport?

A: There is no single explanation for this at present – while there are good levels of occupancy across the Caledonian network, recent seasonal departures could, at least in part, account for this.

Q: Have Scottish Canals considered crowdfunding for projects?

A: Yes, we do consider and explore this option where possible, but generally very it's very difficult to access in practice. Moreover, the funding is often tied a project which might not align with key objectives.

Q: Given the increased visibility of birds and invertebrates, will there be any consideration given to decreasing grass cutting in future year?

A: This is under continual review. All viewpoints are considered and future plans will be based upon creating the most inclusive and enjoyable canal-side experience for all.

Q: Where is the Carse Hub? Will it be reopened by 24th April 2021?

A: The works will be delivered near Merkinch/South Kessock (full details available at <https://www.scottishcanals.co.uk/placemaking/carse-hub-inverness/>). We are challenging our contractors to make sure the stated reopening date is achievable, but are cognisant that challenges may continue to unfold.

Q: Why was there a contrast between East & West district staff procedures in 2020 (e.g. Lock Keepers in the West would handle ropes, while those in the East did not)?

A: Scottish Canals' policy was the same across each district, but it is possible that staff's own concerns about working during a pandemic have manifested here.

Q: is there a plan to update electric points at Seaport Marina.

A: If any points require replacement, the Maintenance Team will be tend to it as soon as they can.

Q: As a potential boost to marketability, have Scottish Canals pursued the Caledonian Canal becoming a UNESCO World Heritage Site?

A: We have tentatively thought about this in the past, particularly as a stakeholder in the bid to make Loch Ness a UNESCO World Heritage site. Loch Ness didn't go ahead due to the legislative challenges and ongoing criteria which are significant challenges to maintain UNESCO status. Existing

sites are continually challenged on their status and proposed projects and improvements, and this could end up being counterproductive with respect to trying to make future improvements to the canal. Moreover, additional resource would be required to manage the UNESCO status of the Canal. The anniversary in 2022 is a possible time to reconsider a plan, but we need to ensure the UNESCO badge brings value to stakeholders.

Q: When will Crinan Lock 14 be fixed?

A: Hydraulic issues are to be resolved during 2020-21 winter works. Replacement of gates 14 and 15 will take place later in 2021.

Q: Are there plans to charge for motor homes to generate more revenue?

A: Yes – Dunardry has been identified as a hotspot where we can implement a car park ticketing machine, with works currently being scoped up.

Q: Will there be works to improve the function of facility blocks, particularly at Dochgarroch?

A: Yes, this is in the scope of upcoming works. Laggan is high priority, with Gairloch to follow. Funding is also set aside for Dochgarroch.

On boat safety certificates users noted that many people feel this is a block to people seeking berths. They feel that the current checks have little relevance to motor/sea-faring yachts and their safety. *Scottish Canals* responded to say we have reviewed the process. At present, there isn't a better alternative available. It was therefore decided to keep the current process in place to retain some framework for managing risks – the random gas checks on boats, for example, are still of critical safety importance. There have been 3 boat fires and 2 explosions in 21 years. While much of the customer base is supportive of having a safety scheme in place, we are aware of areas of concern and possible improvement.

On Scottish Canals operating practice, users thanked the range of Scottish Canals staff for their work throughout 2020, noting the immense pressures faced and welcomed the proposed changes in the Strategic Plan, such as online transit license purchases. There was however some disappointment at the late and “less-than-frictionless” reopening and the prospect of a winter closure at Fort Augustus in 2021-22.

Scottish Canals explained that a concerted effort was made to open as quickly reasonably possible, ultimately with public and staff safety in mind, whilst also dealing with many unknowns. Challenges were noted around a programme works – today, a rebuilt of the canals from scratch would cost c. £1.8 Bn, whereas recent annual investment in the canals has been as little as £2m. Degradation and climate change are two significant ongoing challenges, with the Muiravonside incident itself causing £20m of damages (£6.5m apportioned to Scottish Canals). Currently, there is an asset backlog £74m, and it will take time to address everything. With specific reference to Fort Augustus, if we didn't invest during the winter, there would be a requirement to close the area down during the summer.

On increased towpath usage, users noted the uptick in canal-side activity, with the unfortunate side effect of some members of the public encroaching on pontoons and touching boats.

Scottish Canals explained that there was a clear message from Scottish Government to encourage Scottish Canals to keep as much of the canal open as a resource to people / green space, during

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Covid restrictions. However, where appropriate we have, and will continue to, work with boaters to ensure appropriate direction and signage is applied where appropriate.

Crinan & Caledonian Canals

On Seaport Marina, some users felt it was not fulfilling its potential in terms of occupancy and that pricing may be prohibitive.

Scottish Canals responded that the situation is under continued review, particularly with the upcoming creation of berths at Treehouse (formerly Carse Hub) and that internal and external conversations are ongoing in order to arrive at the right pricing structure.

On vegetation management, users reiterated positive sentiment regarding less grass cutting which led to greater emergence of plants, birds and invertebrates.

Scottish Canals said that the amount of vegetation we don't cut has gradually diminished over the past two years, partly driven by an effort to rewild the canal where possible.