

John McLuckie 0:20

Hello and welcome to this episode of the Argyll and Bute Community Planning Podcast. I'm John McLuckie, Partnerships Lead for Community Planning in Argyll and Bute and following the recent Community Planning Partnership event focusing on transport, joining me today is Ranald Robertson, Director of Highlands and Islands Transport Partnership, HITRANS. Ranald, welcome to the podcast.

Ranald Robertson 0:39

Thanks for having me John, really pleased to be here.

John McLuckie 0:42

Thank you. So can I start by asking you how your role and the role of HITRANS links to community planning in Argyll and Bute?

Ranald Robertson 0:49

Yes, certainly. I think probably everyone recognises the importance of transport across the Highlands and Islands, but Argyll and Bute has its own share of challenges with its transport infrastructure, its connectivity, and in terms of HITRANS' role in the Community planning process, we are a named key agency in the the Community Empowerment Act.

But I think, you know, it's really always been part of HITRANS' DNA to try and support that partnership type of approach to improving outcomes, and recognising that transport is really important in terms of being a derived demand, but you know it's to support other parts of our economy, it's to let people move, let people access employment, education and health so, I think you know from that starting point.

And HITRANS has been a statutory body created through the 2005 Transport Scotland Act that actually had already come together as a voluntary partnership of local authorities covering the Highlands and Islands, because there are real shared challenges, there are challenges of a cross-boundary nature, even with our very large geography and our large individual local authority geographies. You know people in the Western Isles are very reliant on Oban as an example, as a port of entry to to mainland Scotland, as Oban is really, really important to Argyll islands, including Colonsay, Coll, Tiree and Lismore, so just recognising that we had some real shared challenges and then once of course you land in the mainland from one of our islands, then you will have challenges of the A82, the A85, the A83 if you're coming from the Islay side, so reflecting some of that need, there was a degree of momentum built up to try and establish a way of working in partnership which spun out of the 1998 Convention of the Highlands and Islands, and then evolved and made more

permanent through the Transport Scotland Act and in Argyll and Bute, we have quite an interesting dynamic that the Council area is split across 2 regional transport partnership areas with HITRANS covering most of Argyll and Bute but the Helensburgh and Lomond area sits within Strathclyde Partnership for Transport.

Again, underlining the importance of that collaboration as well, that actually can exist both at the local authority level, but at the multi regional level as well.

John McLuckie 3:12

Absolutely, yeah. Thanks for covering some of the challenges there, but also some of the geographical nature of transport in Argyll and Bute.

Just in terms of yourself and your background in transport, how did your career evolve into the position that you're in just now?

Ranald Robertson 3:25

Again, you know, I think in the Highlands and Islands transport is so important and central to our lives and in my own case it was very central to my life growing up. I am from North Uist in the Western Isles, originally a native of North Uist but my father was the port manager for Cal Mac. So I grew up in Pier House beside the ferry terminal, and probably lived and breathed, and the pier was probably not always the most appropriate, but it was the playground that I enjoyed bothering my father's colleagues and trying to lend a hand, and I think probably that just really seeped in through whatever process.

So I also benefited from summer jobs, so Cal Mac were very good to me as well throughout, you know, from the age of 15 and you know, in turning what was a lot of voluntary effort before that into something that I at least had a return and after university, I worked for a period of time for Cal Mac, having worked all my holidays really from university for Cal Mac in various positions as well, so as it happened, my father's career moved on which meant a move of location, but I was able to still work for Cal Mac and actually ended up covering lots of ports around the network, including Oban. So I had experience of working throughout the Highlands and Islands, in various roles for Cal Mac.

And then I secured longer term employment with Highland Council in their public transport unit and from there in 2002 I was fortunate enough to secure a role within HITRANS, a voluntary partnership delivering a public transport infrastructure and information improvement programme across the then HITRANS region, which spanned from Unst to Machrihanish.

Shetland's no longer part of HITRANS, but it allowed me to get a really, really good grounding and knowing the Highlands and Islands well and I've been there ever since in various jobs, so we are 23 years on and I don't really have any aspirations to be anywhere else. I'm lucky enough to have had

lots of roles within HITRANS and now to be in the Chief Officer role as well, so, and every day is different and every day is a challenge and an enjoyable one at that, so.

John McLuckie 5:36

Yeah, yeah, that's fantastic, and I'm sure a lot of people working across Argyll and Bute, and other areas of course, will agree that every day is completely different and will enjoy that element of their role.

I was going to ask you just thinking about the recent event that the Community Planning Partnership had on transport. One of the focuses of the Committee Planning Partnership in Argyll and Bute is to work to address inequalities in transport infrastructure in the area.

Are there some examples you can give of how your organisation is helping to address transport inequalities?

Ranald Robertson 6:04

Yeah, thinking about this in terms of community planning and what community planning can do, one that does come to mind at the moment is some work that we are undertaking to understand whether there's a case for a health and transport action plan to be established covering the Highlands and Islands.

What we're hoping to to see created will cover a slightly larger area than the HITRANS area because we are looking to work with, NHS Shetland, Shetland Islands Council and ZetTrans as part of that.

Because lots of the issues that affect people's access to health services are shared, a lot of the challenges might be and some of those fall into that cross boundary situation in terms of the SLAs that might exist between NHS Highland and NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde for the Argyll and Bute area, or for the Western Isles in a similar fashion as well.

So, we are doing some work at the moment trying to understand how that could work to try and actually have maybe a focused effort looking at some of those difficulties that people face, identifying some of the gaps that exist in our transport provision, but also probably trying to seek to ask questions about can we deliver these services more locally as well as in more central locations, whether the central location might be Inverness because it is a difficult place to get to for an awful lot of Argyll and Bute, or looking at the Western Isles, even within the Western Isles, centralising in Stornaway can be very challenging if you live in Barra, you just don't have the transport links, so we're doing some work at the moment and I think that will, you know, really look to build on what community planning can foster in terms of bringing local authority, regional transport partnership and health board together to try and identify, 'Here's the problem, what's the solution, what can we do?'. It may mean changing how we deliver some bus services, it might mean considering a greater role for demand responsive transport, but actually the health and transport planning wouldn't just

sit in the context of getting me to an appointment, but it might actually consider trying to enhance the role for social prescribing of walking and cycling as part of what happens in terms of the primary aspects of healthcare, and then in that area HITRANS has got some budget that can support the development and delivery of some of those sorts of initiatives, some support for access to bikes or fostering or improving the infrastructure for walking and cycling in our region as well.

John McLuckie 8:23

Fantastic and some of what you were talking about there, obviously we have our three priority outcomes in the new Outcomes Improvement Plan in Argyll and Bute, transport infrastructure being one of them, but also community well-being and I think some of what you were talking about there overlaps into other outcomes that we have, so that should be really interesting to see how that develops and for the Community Planning Partnership to be involved in that.

And I think as well just touching a bit on you were talking about walking and cycling there, I think active travel is an area that the Community Planning Partnership will be looking at as well. Is there anything more that you can say about active travel within Argyll and Bute?



Ranald Robertson 9:00

Yeah, so one of the areas that we've been talking about with the Council is the opportunity to establish shared bike systems in larger settlements, including Oban, Oban's certainly been mentioned as one of those. We already have an ebike share system in Fort William and Inverness that we're about to expand into Elgin, but we will look, you know, to have that option available I think in parts of Argyll and Bute as well.

We are working closely with ACT in Argyll and Bute as well to develop access to bike programmes for children, supporting their excellent work in recycling bikes and making them available to people, so that's the type of initiative that we are looking to support. We actually have an officer based within the Dunoon Development Trust in Cowal, who's trying to do some some direct and primary access to supporting a range of activities from led rides to potentially bike buses for schools in the Dunoon and Cowal area as well. So, yeah, lots of different activities, but you know an important aspect that we're looking to bring forward is learning from what we do, and you know if we do something in Caithness and Sutherland and we feel that might apply to to Campbeltown and Kintyre, we'll look to try and take that learning and you know understand what works and it might not work everywhere but at least we wouldn't lose sight of the knowledge that's built across other parts of the region and see how that might apply too.

John McLuckie 10:22

Yeah, yeah, excellent. And you were talking about the initiatives around bike sharing and that kind of

thing, and I'm wondering if you have any other examples of potential innovations there might be over the next few years in terms of transport in Argyll and Bute, but I guess also across the Highlands and Islands that might apply in Argyll and Bute.

Ranald Robertson 10:41

Yeah, so at the moment one quite innovative area that we're working on and that has quite recently been extended on to service in Argyll and Bute is our digital demand responsive transport platform that exists across the whole of the Highlands and Islands with a single back office, but lots of different operations. It's called Moove Flexi, with the two 'o's, so West Coast Motors' west coast service has recently been onboarded on to that which sees two vehicles, one dedicated to the Campbeltown/Kintyre area and one in Dunoon, based in the Cowal area, operate on demand and provide services, hopefully where people require them.

These are long standing ring and ride services as they were first introduced, but we see that as an area that we can build on. We've had some really good results from that same platform working in Moray which has seen growth on the Council's in-house demand responsive transport network grow year on year at a rate about 25% in passenger terms, so it's done very, very well, so we hope to see growth in Argyll and Bute and to understand the potential.

West Coast Motors are a really good partner. They are of course a long standing large employer in Argyll and Bute who we've worked with closely in a number of different initiatives from getting bikes on buses to bike bags on their coaches, now through to this demand responsive transport offering. In that digital space we've secured and expanded real time passenger information for bus passengers at bus stops and because we do public transport information on roadsides all across our part of Argyll and Bute, and we have also tested the concept of Mobility As A Service which provides a single shop window essentially for a range of transport services so you can go and buy your bus ticket, your train ticket, your ferry ticket and your flight all in the one place. So that was a pilot project that ended at the tail end of last year.

But we're already in discussion with Transport Scotland to look to develop a single Scottish solution for mass so that we'd see hopefully, Calmac Ferries, ScotRail, Scottish Citylink, West Coast Motors, all available to book in the one place and pay for, and removing that barrier of 'How do I get around by public transport in an area?', I think it's important for visitors and you recognising being in the vanguard on that in Scotland, it probably reflects I think the importance of visitors to our regional economy as well.

John McLuckie 13:13

Yeah, absolutely. There's a lot in there that chimes with the discussions we had at the Community Planning Partnership event recently where we looked at a number of potential ways which transport could evolve over the next few years as well. I was going to ask you as well, you mentioned air travel

there a little bit. Is there anything around air travel that might be kind of new innovations that might help reduce inequalities in Argyll and Bute?

Ranald Robertson 13:36

Yeah, there certainly are, and there are ongoing challenges in a way with air travel in that it can be quite expensive at the point of use. So I think that is probably something that we do recognise. There have been challenges with funding the existing Argyll isles' public service obligation services out of Oban as well, and there's always the question of the environmental impact of flight as well, so we aren't without challenges to seek, but what we have to recognise is the importance of air travel in supporting business, supporting visitors, getting people quickly to market, whether it's themselves for a day's business as well or a shorter visit, and air services in the Highlands and Islands are not the same thing as low cost travel globally or across Europe. So we do need to move the narrative around that a bit. But I think, on a positive front, and it's work that HITRANS has been involved in and I know Argyll and Bute Council are directly involved in themselves as part of the Argyll growth deal, but the decarbonisation of air service technologies is starting to happen and it's going to start with smaller aircraft, which means that we actually have a really good opportunity to be on the frontline of decarbonising air services, and we've already been involved in lots of good work on that front. HITRANS has been lead partner in a project called the Sustainable Aviation Test Environment, which is primarily headquartered in Kirkwall where we put in place a test centre and a hangar, but actually throughout its life has evolved to become more of a regional focused product, and we have just recently submitted applications to the Future of Flight Fund that the UK Government operate and we have secured some funding within our own regional growth deals around the region to do things like testing drone operations for logistics movements.

Some of those drone operations have seen sustainable aviation fuel tested on the same technology platform as well, which means that it doesn't necessarily need to be a fossil fuel source.

We've tested battery eVTOL technology, which is electric Vertical Take-Off and Landing aircraft technology as well, so we are trying to have a sense of what the future might look like, and the future if we're thinking about that vertical take-off and landing may not be as bound to needing a runway to make it work as well, so there may well be much greater flexibility in what an air service offer could look like for the Highlands and Islands and the ability to connect parts of Argyll that currently can be quite a challenging journey between Dunoon and Oban, or Campbeltown and Helensburgh as well, so you know we can start thinking about what air services look like in a different way that might be decarbonised, and as we transition though we do need to ensure that people recognise that elsewhere, and primarily thinking about Holyrood or Westminster, that air services in the Highlands and Islands are really important in a way that they're not really important in other places because people can hop in a car and drive, they can hop on a bus, they can hop on a train.

But, because of the distances involved, and I think sometimes people forget just how significant the geographic challenge is for us in the Highlands and Islands. You know, we're 40% of Scotland's land

mass, the rest of the country get to move in less than 60% and actually the distance between Glasgow and Edinburgh isn't much different to Fort William to Oban, and we don't consider for William to Oban to be a challenging trip to make.

So I think there does need to be almost some level of better awareness of what our geographic challenges look like, even before we factor in sea crossings as part of the challenge.

John McLuckie 17:32

Really, really interesting, and it's definitely a topic that the Community Planning Partnership have a focus on just now and something that future episodes of the podcast will come back on and it'll be great to get you back on in a few months time, Ranald, and then just see how things are progressing with what you're working on.

Thank you very much for for joining me in this episode of the Argyll and Bute Community Planning Podcast, Ranald, thank you.

Ranald Robertson 17:54

You're very welcome, John. Thank you.