

Cross-Party Group on Sustainable Transport

Tue 2 December 2025, 18:00 - 19:30

Minute

Present

MSPs

Graham Simpson MSP (Convener, chairing)
Sarah Boyack MSP (Deputy convener)
John Mason MSP (Deputy convener)

Invited guests

Tim Dexter (Transport & Environment [T&E])
Kathleen MacFadden (Highland Spring Group)

Non-MSPs group members

In-person

Angus McIntosh (Heriot Watt University)
Colin Howden (Transform Scotland)
David Murray-Smith (Scottish Association for Public Transport)
Emine Zehra Akgun (Heriot Watt University)
Laura Hyde-White (Transform Scotland)
Frank Roach (Hitrans)
Ian Budd (Friends of the Far North Line)
Jingjun Li (Heriot Watt University)
Mark Shields (Walk Wheel Cycle Trust)
Martin Bignell (Rail Freight Group)
Neil Gould (independent)
Robert Macbean (Walk Wheel Cycle Trust)
Stuart Mcluckie (Graham Simpson MSP office)
Craig Horne (John Mason MSP office)

Online

Alexander Foote (Heriot Watt University)
Chris Day (Edinburgh Bus Users Group)
Dave du Feu (Spokes)
Douglas Bryce (Disability Equality Scotland)

Heather Noller (Network Rail)
Ken Haig (Levenmouth Railway Campaign)
Kenny McClure
Mike Harrison
Richard Gale (Highland Council)
Sara Duncan
Scott Prentice (Transform Scotland)
Veronica Boyce

Apologies

Brian Whittle MSP
Mark Ruskell MSP

Agenda item 1: Introductions

Graham Simpson opened the meeting at 18:03 and introduced the meeting as the second in a series on sustainable freight, with a focus on cross-border freight. He introduced guest speakers: Kathleen MacFadden (Highland Spring) and Tim Dexter (T&E).

Agenda item 2: Rail freight in Scotland (Kathleen MacFadden, Highland Spring Group)

Kathleen, Head of Supply Chain at Highland Spring Group, reported on the Blackford rail freight facility for Highland Spring, tracing its journey from concept to operation. Opened in August 2022 and fully operational by January 2023, the project repurposed a former passenger platform and addressed the challenge of around 80 HGVs per day passing through the village to transport 12 million litres of water weekly. The move to rail has improved supply-chain resilience, cut approximately 8,000 HGV movements annually, and saved around 3000 tonnes of CO₂, while benefiting the local community.

She highlighted the crucial collaboration with Network Rail, Transport Scotland, Scottish Water, SSE, and the Blackford Community Council, which shaped a design focused on sustainability, community impact, and site suitability. Noise and visual disturbance were minimised through acoustic barriers, continuous welded rail, and a fully electric crane, and recent innovations (such as extra-long containers carrying 15% more water) further reduced HGV journeys.

Looking ahead, Kathleen outlined options for the next five years, including a Sunday service, expanded rail-connected warehouse space in the south, a new rail-linked warehouse in the north, and additional rail paths to support future growth, continuing the facility's trajectory of sustainability, efficiency, and community benefit.

Agenda item 3: Accelerating clean trucks in Scotland (Tim Dexter, T&E)

Tim, Vehicle Policy Manager at T&E, reported on the urgent need to decarbonise heavy goods vehicles, drawing on his experience with Europe's leading NGO on clean transport and energy. He highlighted that HGVs account for a fifth of transport emissions in the UK (16% in Scotland) and have a disproportionate impact on urban air quality. Electric HGVs are increasingly cost-effective, with the potential to lower total operating costs for fleet operators, making decarbonisation not just an environmental necessity but a growth opportunity. Lessons from cars and vans demonstrate the power of regulation: the EU's zero-emission vehicle mandates have already driven £23 billion of investment in vehicle and battery plants and £6 billion in charging infrastructure.

Tim warned that the UK is currently missing this opportunity. Only 500 large zero-emission trucks were sold in the past 12 months - just 1.3% of the market. Supply and sales are regulated-driven, and the absence of robust policy is slowing investment in high-density vehicle charging. Yet there is cause for optimism: up to 60% of HGVs could decarbonise today without new public infrastructure, and with policy certainty, electric trucks could achieve cost parity with diesel by the mid-2030s, with urban deliveries already approaching competitiveness.

He stressed that voluntary uptake is unlikely without regulation. While the EU has set a 2040 zero-emission HGV target, the UK lags behind. First targets in 2027 are essential to deliver meaningful CO₂ reductions. Alternative fuels are not scalable for HGVs, so electrification must remain the focus for vehicles that can be electrified, leaving other fuels for sectors such as shipping and aviation.

Tim concluded with policy recommendations: a UK zero-emission vehicle mandate, demand-side support including freight zones and fleet incentives, clear charging rollout targets, and measures to remove barriers to depot charging, such as grid connection delays and planning hurdles.

Agenda item 4: Q&A

Following the presentations, the group entered a Q&A segment with the speakers, during which discussions covered:

Rail freight operations

Only 29% of Highland Spring movements currently use rail, mostly south-bound to Cumbernauld, while 71% remain on lorries. Platform length at Blackford limits train size, with 90 box containers cycled at present, potentially reaching 130 where southern bottlenecks allow. Additional services and extensions at later stations are the primary way to increase rail share, with long-term potential of 42%.

Electrification remains partial, with hybrid trains on some lines and full diesel on longer routes. Expansion and Sunday services require coordination with Network Rail and other stakeholders, while congestion further south and cross-border capacity limit overall rail availability. Return trips are often empty due to low demand, though discussions continue with potential UK suppliers. Scaling rail freight is seen as key to economic viability and decarbonisation. Peak volumes are manageable for Highland Spring due to dedicated space, but congestion is more of a concern for other freight operators.

Electric trucks and infrastructure

Electric HGVs offer around 300 miles per charge but carry a 2–3 tonne payload penalty. Policy and regulation, including ZEV mandates, are crucial to addressing these constraints. Large-scale adoption will require careful planning of electricity supply, with strategic charging points at ports and warehouse hubs. There are also opportunities for operators to sell electricity back to the grid depending on timing and delivery patterns.

Regulatory certainty is essential, as voluntary uptake of electric trucks is unlikely. Early targets are needed to deliver meaningful CO₂ reductions, alongside demand-side measures such as zero-emission freight zones, fleet incentives, and charging rollout targets.

Resilience

Infrastructure resilience was discussed, with battery storage and rail freight improving robustness against extreme weather. Workforce challenges, including driver shortages and an aging workforce, are partially mitigated by the operational simplicity of electric trucks. Autonomous vehicles were noted as a separate issue, with societal readiness still uncertain.

Agenda item 5: Meeting end

Graham Simpson thanked the speakers and attendees before informing the group of the next and final meeting in the CPG's freight series (focussing on international freight) taking place on Tue 17 February. Meeting closed at 19:24.

Draft minutes prepared by Laura Hyde-White (Transform Scotland) 02.12.25.