

Alex Salmond's HML Commitment, 2008

This is the complete story of Rhoda Grant's written Parliamentary Questions requesting an explanation for the dropping of then First Minister, Alex Salmond's 2008 commitment to speeding up the Highland Main Line services.

Question reference: S5W-20998

Asked by: **Rhoda Grant**, MSP for Highlands and Islands, Scottish Labour

Date lodged: 15 January 2019

Current status: Answered by **Michael Matheson** on 1 February 2019

Question

To ask the Scottish Government what action it has taken to fulfil the commitment that was made by the then First Minister in August 2008, following a Cabinet meeting in Inverness, to reduce train journey times between Inverness and Edinburgh to at least two hours 45 minutes, and an average of three hours, with the aim of making “railway travel to the heart of the Highlands, in terms of time, competitive with roads... by a mixture of projects, including line improvement, additional passing loops, double-tracking and signalling upgrades”; what improvements projects were introduced, broken down by what progress has been made with each, and, in light of the comment that “the timescale for implementation is 2011-12”, for what reason the target date was not met, and by what date this level of service will be operational.

Answer

The Scottish Government's Infrastructure Investment Plan, published in 2011, stated that the Highland Main Line Rail Improvement project would be completed in phases between 2014 and 2025.

Phase one was delivered as planned in December 2012, increasing services from 9 to 11 trains per day in each direction, and reducing journey times by an average of 6 minutes at a cost of £1.2 million.

Phase two, which is currently scheduled to be completed in December 2019, will see a £57 million investment providing an hourly service between Perth and Inverness, delivery of a reduction in average journey times by around 10 minutes and more efficient freight operations. A fleet of refurbished High Speed Trains is planned to be used for this new timetable offering customers greater comfort and more capacity. We are engaged with local communities regarding calling points with the aim of providing calls at stations which represent maximum benefit for users of the service. The new timetable will also include improvements to the first and last trains. Overall, these plans will provide passengers with better connectivity with the Central Belt and Inverness whilst boosting the economic growth for the whole of Scotland.

The long term aspiration remains to deliver a fastest journey time of 2 hours 45 minutes between Inverness and the Central Belt.

Because this answer did not give any explanation about the changed implementation date

from 2011-12 Rhoda asked a further question:

Question reference: S6W-13023

Asked by: **Rhoda Grant**, MSP for Highlands and Islands, Scottish Labour

Date lodged: Friday, 09 December 2022

Current Status: Answered by **Jenny Gilruth** on 9 January 2023

To ask the Scottish Government what stage plans are at to fulfil the 2008 commitment made by the then First Minister at the Cabinet Meeting in Inverness Town House that the average journey time between Inverness and Edinburgh on the Highland Main Line would be reduced to 3hrs by 2011-12, with a fastest timing of 2h 45m, by means of the installation of more passing loops, the extension of existing double track sections and signalling improvements.

However, the Scottish Parliament Chamber Desk which manages parliamentary questions, motions and amendments replaced the wording with the following, based on Rhoda's 2019 Question:

To ask the Scottish Government, further to the answer to question S5W-20998 by Michael Matheson on 1 February 2019, what action it has taken to fulfil the commitment that was made by the then First Minister in August 2008, following a Cabinet meeting in Inverness, to reduce train journey times between Inverness and Edinburgh to at least two hours 45 minutes, and an average of three hours, with the aim of making "railway travel to the heart of the Highlands, in terms of time, competitive with roads... by a mixture of projects, including line improvement, additional passing loops, double-tracking and signalling upgrades"; what improvements projects were introduced, broken down by what progress has been made with each, and, in light of the comment that "the timescale for implementation is 2011-12", for what reason the target date was not met, and by what date this level of service will be operational.

Answer

The Scottish Government's Infrastructure Investment Plan, published in 2011, stated that the Highland Main Line (HML) Rail Improvement project would be completed in phases between 2014 and 2025.

Phase one was delivered as planned in December 2012, increasing services from 9 to 11 trains per day in each direction, and reducing journey times by an average of 6 minutes at a cost of £1.2 million.

HML Phase Two was completed in March 2019 at a cost of £57m. This phase delivered signalling upgrades at Aviemore and Pitlochry stations, along with an extension of the passing loop at Aviemore and the reconfiguration and extension of the platforms at Pitlochry, enabling simultaneous arrival of trains at both these stations.

In line with a recommendation from the draft Strategic Transport Project Review 2, Network Rail is developing proposals for the lengthening of several passing loops along the line to enable longer and more frequent freight and passenger services. These proposals will then be considered by Transport Scotland, taking into account the usual affordability and value for money considerations.

Achieving freight modal shift from road to rail has been recognised as a key component in achieving carbon reductions within Scotland's transport system. A single freight train can typically remove 76 HGVs from adjacent roads, reducing congestion and improving safety. The infrastructure work delivered already and an integrated approach to passenger and freight timetable patterns have created capacity for additional rail freight on the Highland Main Line and discussions with key rail freight customers are underway to use this capacity.

That answer began with the same two paragraphs as the 2019 answer (above) but then diverged, referring to STPR2. There is no mention here of the implementation schedule for the 2008 journey time commitment.

On enquiring of the Chamber Desk what had happened Rhoda was informed that it appeared she had been given both a 'Holding Reply' (see below) and a 'Substantive Answer' (shown above) on the same day (9 January). At the Chamber Desk's suggestion she then tabled a further question:

Question reference: S6W-14784

Asked by: **Rhoda Grant**, MSP for Highlands and Islands, Scottish Labour

Date lodged: Monday, 13 February 2023

Current Status: Answered by **Jenny Gilruth** on 16 March 2023

To ask the Scottish Government, further to the answer to question S6W-13023 by Jenny Gilruth on 9 January 2023, when it will fulfil its commitment to reduce train journey times between Inverness and Edinburgh to 2 hours 45 minutes, as referred to in the original question.

Answer (This was in fact the 'Holding Reply' given on 9 January)

Transport Scotland, alongside industry partners, is exploring options for lengthening passing loops on the line to enable longer and more frequent freight and passenger services.

Enabling the transfer of freight traffic, particularly from the adjacent A9 to the Highland Main Line, will produce significant carbon savings and improve safety and traffic flow on the A9.

We will fund the infrastructure enhancements necessary to produce further journey time savings on the Highland Main Line once a robust business case has been established for this expenditure.

In summary, no answer is forthcoming about what happened to the original commitment or why, and a simple 'aspiration' to "deliver a fastest journey time of 2 hours 45 minutes between Inverness and the Central Belt" has been given instead.