

# THE FRIENDS OF THE FAR NORTH LINE



**Cairdean Na Loine Tuath**  
*the campaign group for rail north of  
Inverness - lobbying for improved  
services for the local user, tourist  
and freight operator*

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## STRATEGIC TRANSPORT POLICY REVIEW 2 - DRAFT REPORT, JANUARY 2022 FOFNL RESPONSE

The Friends of the Far North Line is a voluntary campaign group with around 250 members. Our declared aim is to see improved rail provision for passengers and freight using the line from Inverness northwards to Thurso and Wick.

Many of the passengers, and much of the freight potential, will also be using the neighbouring lines across from Inverness to Aberdeen and onwards, and south from Inverness on the Highland Main Line. As these two routes are crucial to our traffic we also keep a close eye on developments there.

1. The Scottish Government's policy to reduce car kms by 20% by 2035 is expected approximately to double the number of rail passengers countrywide. Added to the planned increase in rail freight, this amount of modal shift can only be accommodated by major work on the lines south and east of Inverness as well as some capacity improvements to the Far North Line, especially for freight. There is momentum at present for transferring freight to rail and it would be a serious failing if the necessary capacity were not available.
2. There is also the increasing likelihood of all three lines in the Inverness-Aberdeen-Perth triangle being needed more often for weather-related diversions due to the effect of Climate Change. Whilst passengers can be transported by bus at short notice, freight is far less flexible. Single track railways are unsuitable as inter-city routes and this needs to be addressed in the near future.
3. STPR2 sets out general recommendations for the kind of transport provision Scotland should aim for, and compares these with the Scottish Government's general policy tenets. The general recommendations cover all the obvious needs for transport in Scotland but there is very little detail about how the recommendations should be fulfilled. FOFNL assumes that the final report will include a list of specific projects.
4. There is comparatively little about rail in the draft STPR2 report, especially with regard to the HML, A2I and the Far North Line about which there are no details. The effect of the pandemic in changing the emphasis of travel away from commuting towards leisure and tourism, combined with the requirement for major modal shift to rail to meet the Net Zero target, require new ways of considering investment needs. The long-standing methodology based on the greatest potential usage as an indicator of 'value for money' does not fit the new reality and in truth has always put the Highland area, with its comparatively low population, at a disadvantage.
5. The original STPR Report of 2008 contained specific plans for the HML which were not implemented. It is worrying to find this sentence in the STPR2 Draft Report: "*Future passenger rail investment should therefore be targeted on the strongest city-to-city markets as the routes where the greatest value from improvements will be realised*". If travellers from Perth northwards, and between

Aberdeen and Inverness, are to be enticed out of their cars the very least they need is a fast, regular, reliable rail service. There is nothing in STPR2 so far which suggests that this will be achieved. The 'value' mentioned in the quote above must be considered in social and economic development terms, not financial.

6. Users of the Far North Line are beginning to benefit from the work done by the Far North Line Review Team which was set up at the end of 2016. This includes replacing the train operation of points at the entrance and exit of passing loops with radio-controlled point motors, providing electronic passenger-operated request stop equipment, upgrading level crossings to allow faster transit of trains, replacing one level crossing with a bridge, upgrading the RETB equipment, and installing a passing loop at Delmore near the southern end of the line. A complete reworking of the service pattern is being considered, which would allow some limited-stop journeys, thereby reducing journey times.

7. Much more needs to be done once this work is completed so FoFNL hopes to see the following:

- New passing loop(s) on one, or both, of the two long sections between Helmsdale and Georgemas Junction (each 24¼ miles)
- Best possible modal interchange facilities at Inverness and at Thurso for Orkney
- Provision of a station at Halkirk and the construction of a West chord to bypass Georgemas Junction Station
- Provision of Thurso-Wick shuttle service
- New alternatively fuelled rolling stock
- Additional year-round Sunday service to Thurso/Wick
- Provision of a station at Evanton
- The FNL capitalising on the presence at Invergordon of one of the few deep water ports on the East Coast
- Additional regular freight traffic (intermodal / bulk / semi-bulk, such as timber and steel)

8. Many of our passengers are travelling to/from Edinburgh. The current journey time between Perth and Edinburgh is roughly as it was in 1895. With the closure of the direct route in 1970, it is now much quicker for passengers and freight to travel by road. A 35 minute reduction in the rail journey would be possible if the direct route via Kinross were reopened.

9. **Conclusion:** It is disappointing to see so little mention of projects for railways in the Highlands where, arguably, there is the most work needing to be done. This huge area is being left behind the rest of Scotland in rail transport terms, at the very time when it needs much better rail provision for passengers and freight. The 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> priorities for work on the HML and A2I in STPR of 2008 were largely dropped, without consultation.

The STPR2 process is taking a very long time to produce very few definite results, while time is running out to achieve the modal shift required for Net Zero.

Our **2020 STPR2 Submission** is attached for reference.

*Ian Budd, Convener, Friends of the Far North Line, 7 April 2022*