

# STRUNG ALONG

*Highland Railways Investment - Almost Always "Tomorrow"*

[www](http://www)

## Background

All three of the railway routes radiating from Inverness were built using capital from shareholders, on the expectation of dividends. It was difficult to raise sufficient funds to build the kind of railways the companies would have preferred. Thus all three lines were built as mostly single track, with quite a few passing places, usually at stations.

The Highland Railway did manage some doubling work, including 6 miles at the Inverness end of the Far North Line and 23 and 11 mile stretches on the Highland Main Line. Most of these were singled in the 1960s, at a time when road transport was seen as the inevitable mode for the future, and the Treasury didn't like spending so much money on (the, by that time, nationalised) railways.

More economies were made in the 1980s as passing loops were removed, leaving the railways with a low capacity, only suitable for infrequent traffic. The one exception to the trend was the reversal of the HML singling of the 23 miles between Blair Atholl and Dalwhinnie, which was redoubled in 1976 on the expectation of North Sea oil related use.

Scotland has inherited Highland railways which are seriously lacking in the capacity and resilience to be able to take up the Scottish Government's planned modal shift of traffic from road to rail.

One would have expected the government to have risen to this challenge, as promised many years ago, and to have started a programme of works to provide the kind of railway needed now.

This simply hasn't happened, instead there are frequently repeated 'background promises' but comparatively little action - nowhere near what is needed.

Adding to the present difficulties, the government has committed to electrifying the Perth-Inverness-Aberdeen triangle. This should be investment on top of the necessary capacity and resilience improvements but the signs are that only electrification is currently being planned.

Every issue of this magazine, and very many public utterances, from newspapers to the Inverness Chamber of Commerce, along with various studies, all carry the same plea - provide a railway in the Highlands suitable for achieving modal shift.

This means double track wherever possible and many more passing loops, so that there is room for more freight and a more intensive, regular, reliable passenger service. Worth mentioning at this point that the parallel roads are all 'double track', i.e. not 'single track with passing places', yet the Scottish Government is inexplicably in the process of committing to spend money on vast road dualling projects (equivalent of a quadruple track railway) instead of rail infrastructure.

## Promises

Having said in the printed edition of *Far North Express* that we would give a survey of promises made, it would seem more correct to say that the only actual 'promise' concerning two of the three routes out of Inverness was made by Alex Salmond as First Minister in August 2008.

The closest the FNL has to a promise was the Network Rail announcement at our 2022 AGM & Conference that the Delmore Loop would be operational in 2024.

All other specific mentions of plans for these railways are 'intentions', 'aspirations', 'hopes', 'needs', or whatever you wish to call them.

The source of our frustration is that these intentions exist in the background and are regularly referred to, but are always just out of reach. To make this worse, the Scottish Government celebrates

minor (but useful) achievements, such as the £57m spent on extending two of the existing HML passing loops, as though things are progressing as planned.

Consistently, throughout the period from 2008 to the present, the need for major improvements to these routes has been spelt out by reports, bodies such as Transform Scotland, the media and of course rail campaigners. Unfortunately to no avail, even though both Alex Salmond and Nicola Sturgeon expressed the view publicly that the railway must be able to compete with road journeys in terms of travel time.

## Timeline

Here is a selective timeline from 2008 to the present:

- **2008** - Alex Salmond promise in Inverness: reduction of the journey time between Inverness and Edinburgh to an average of 3 hours, with a quickest service taking no more than 2 hr 45 mins by 2012.
- **2008** - Publication of the first *Strategic Transport Projects Review (STPR)*: specific HML and A21 'objectives', both in two "phases". HML: A reduction in journey times of approximately 35 minutes, resulting in Edinburgh to Inverness journeys of under three hours, with similar reductions for services to Glasgow. A21: Reduction of full-length journey time to 2 hr or less. Minimum hourly frequency between Aberdeen and Inverness, with two trains per hour on the Nairn to Inverness section. Double tracking at both ends.
- **2011** - Scottish Government *Infrastructure Investment Plan*: stated that the "Highland Main Line Rail Improvement project" would be completed in phases between 2014 and 2025.
- **2012** - Transport Scotland: "Phase one of the project was delivered in December 2012, which increased services from nine to 11 trains per day and reduced journey times by an average of six minutes (and on some services by up to 18 minutes) at a cost of £1.2 million." **In fact only one service was 18 minutes quicker.**
- **2015** - *Delivering the Goods*, Transport Scotland: "Developing the rail network capability north of the central belt also remains a priority, particularly on the Highland Main Line between Perth and Inverness, and the other intercity routes to Aberdeen. Investment to 2019 will support some additional increased double tracking between Aberdeen and Inverness whilst a combination of some double track sections and longer passing loops on single line sections are expected to be delivered on the Highland Main Line. Substantial improvements to these key intercity routes, including additional gauge clearance and capacity to operate longer length trains, will continue beyond 2019 in line with the Strategic Transport Projects Review (STPR) recommendations and options identified through the industry's long-term planning process. Taken together with a focus on considering making available freight paths to better align with customers' needs, these improvements will help provide the scope for the rail freight market share to increase through the carriage of more intermodal traffic as well as key Highland exports such as whisky and timber."
- **2016** - *Network Rail Scotland Route Study*. Committed rail scheme - Highland Main Line Phase 2. FNL options also listed, including replacement of RETB with conventional signalling on the busier section between Inverness and Dingwall, and installation of double track in the section between Dingwall and Invergordon.
- **2019** - Network Rail: "The number of trains between Inverness and the Central Belt will have increased from 11 in each direction at the start of the project to 15 in 2019 – almost a 40% increase." **In 2024 there are 11 northbound and 12 southbound services.**
- **2019** - Transport Scotland: "Phase two of the £57 million project was completed (infrastructure ready for use) on 25 March 2019, on time and under budget." **It was only under budget because the original specification was reduced, resulting in insufficient loop length for some freight**

trains.

- **2019** - Phase 1 of Aberdeen to Inverness rail improvements completed in December. Forres station was relocated and a new passing loop incorporated. This is the one major investment in Highland railways so far, but only goes part of the way towards fulfilling STPR's remit.
- **2020** - Kintore Station opened.
- **2022** - FoFNL AGM & Conference: "The Delmore Loop will be operational in 2024" - Network Rail.
- **2022** - STPR2, December: "(STPR2) recommends a programme of enhancements, including new and longer passing loops with more flexibility, and permissible speed increases. This would achieve improvements to journey times and increases in capacity and reliability for passenger and freight services."
- Under "Options Sifted In for Further Consideration" there was quite a long list of potential improvements for the Far North Line. **We must remember that STPR2 contains only recommendations, no promises.**
- **2023** - Inverness Airport Station opened, including a loop and provision for a siding to the West Fraser factory.
- **2023** - Parliamentary Answer in March: "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." "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."
- **2024** - Transport Scotland website: "Upgrading the Highland Main Line is one of the Scottish Government's key priorities. The long-term goal of the project seeks to achieve a fastest journey time of 2 hours 45 minutes between Inverness and the Central Belt with an average journey time of 3 hours and an hourly service by 2025."

\*Implicit in the term 'business case' is cost per resident. This puts the Highlands at a great disadvantage. A better term might be 'strategic case' since all transport projects potentially benefit everyone, no matter where they live, including visitors and tourists.

## Conclusion

Quite simply, the Scottish Government, although being continuously advised about what is necessary for rail in the Highlands, has not got to grips with the issues. This needs to change.

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