

# Far North Line Review Team Consolidation Report

*“It is essential we make the most of this important asset for passengers, for sustainable freight transport, and for the communities and businesses along the whole route.”* Fergus Ewing, 16 December 2016

August 2019



## Remit

Fergus Ewing MSP, Cabinet Secretary for Rural Economy, established the Far North Line Review Team in December 2016 with a remit to identify potential opportunities to improve connectivity, operational performance and journey time on the line.

## Membership

The Review Team comprised senior representatives from the railway industry (Transport Scotland, Network Rail, ScotRail) as well as relevant stakeholders (HITRANS, Highland Council, HIE, Caithness Transport Forum and Friends of the Far North Line). The Team has now concluded and this report reviews the Team's achievements and sets out activities and responsibilities for future years.

## Report

This report provides a high-level overview of achievements, work-in-progress and future opportunities.



Highlands and Islands Enterprise  
Iomairt na Gàidhealtachd 's nan Eilean



## Achievements to date:

### Safety and Improved Journey Time

In support of **safety and improved journey time** we:

1. Implemented Stage 1 of Level Crossing Upgrade by installing automatic barrier prior to closing the crossing by 2024.
2. Upgraded two level crossings to full barriers.
3. Started a programme of improved animal fencing and removed lineside vegetation to reduce the attractiveness of the line to livestock and deer.
4. Established six new full-time posts in Helmsdale to address fencing and vegetation issues along the line.
5. Removed the speed restriction near Chapelton Farm to allow a linespeed of 75mph.
6. Upgraded open level crossing operations at Brora, Lairg and Rovie to deliver improved line speed and a reduction in the end to end journey time



# Achievements to date:

## Customer service improvements

In support of **improved customer service** we

1. implemented a programme of enhancements at Invergordon station including real time information at the port and wayfinding signage to assist local travellers and the increasing number of cruise ship visitors seeking onward travel.
2. completed the programme to roll out Customer Information Screens at key stations. Almost all of these screens are sustainably powered by solar energy.

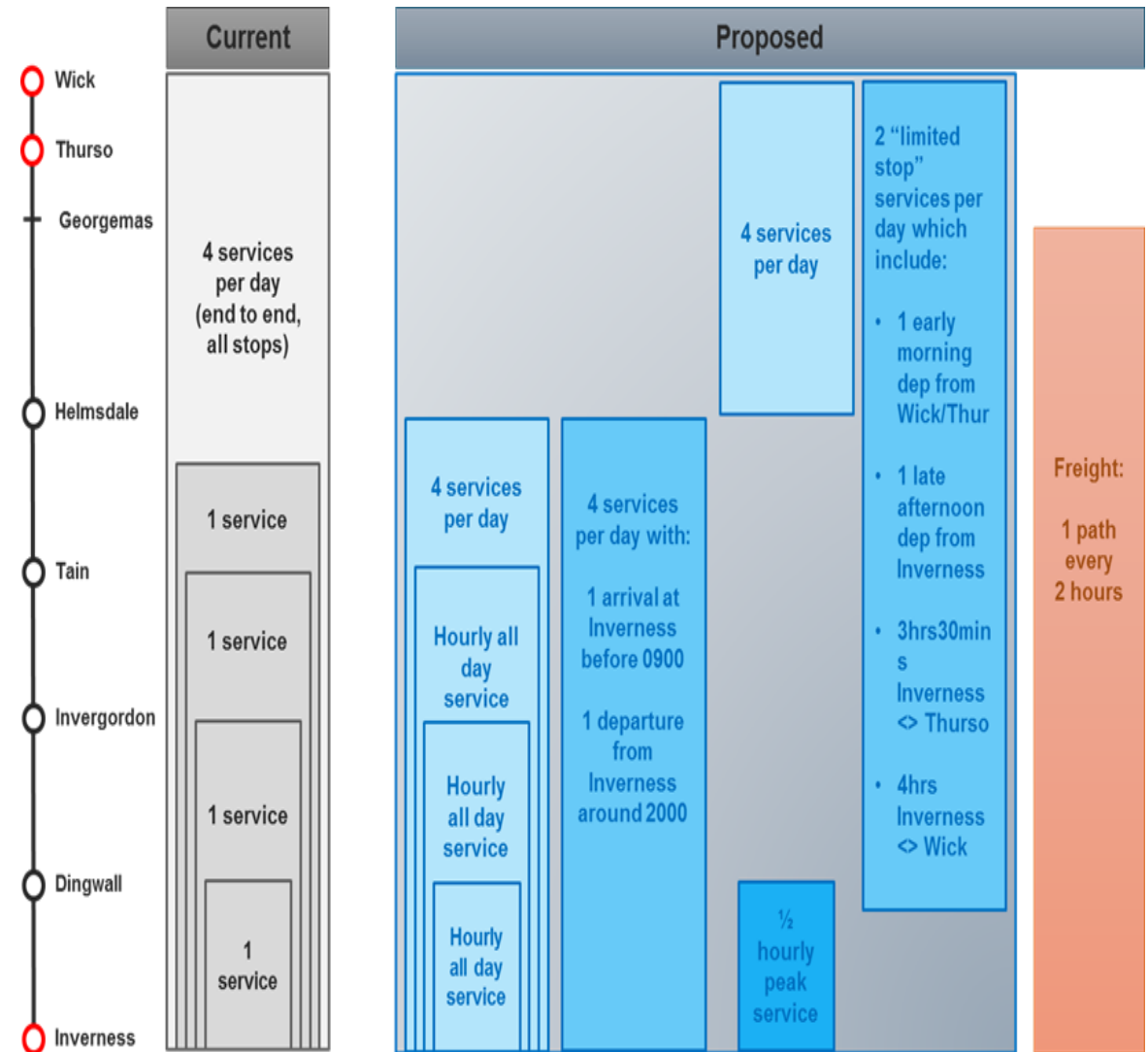


## Achievements to date:

### Timetable and Infrastructure Development

In support of **improved connectivity** we

- identified the need for a substantial change to the timetable structure to address the differing needs of the communities (and visitors) along the length of the rail corridor.
- developed a proposed specification which focusses on addressing future demand and economic sustainability. This includes more regular services to meet the needs of the growing commuter market on the corridor between Tain and Inverness, as well as proving better timed services both for intermediate and end-to-end journeys and to improve freight access on the line.
- undertook a technical review and strategic analysis along the length of the route to understand the magnitude of improvements required to the track and signalling systems to support the proposed new enhanced service specification.
- commissioned Network Rail to develop infrastructure proposals to deliver the proposed service specification.



The proposed service specification

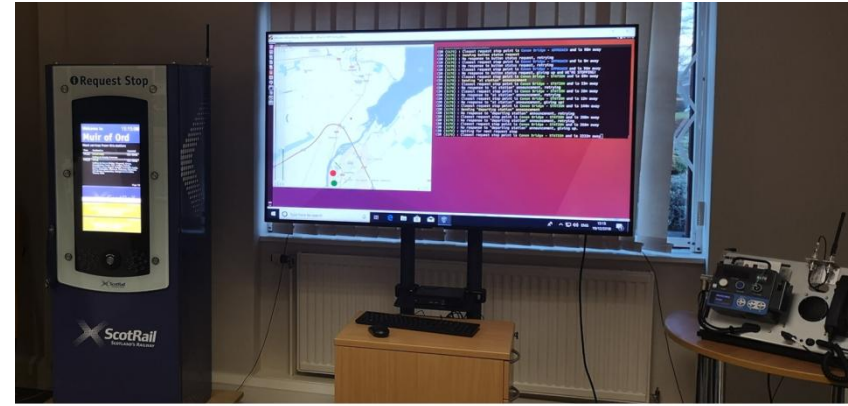


## Work in development:

### Signalling

Understanding the operation of the unique signalling system, Radio Electronic Token Block (RETB), operating in the Far North route led to the identification of several enhancement opportunities to improve operations on the route. These include the introduction of **Enhanced Token Transfer** and **Automated Train Describer integration**. These improvements will streamline the exchange of safety-critical data by operational staff to the benefit of passengers and freight customers.

**Enhanced Token Transfer** is an innovation that will better use the capability of the RETB system to reduce the “on air” radio time for token transfers which will greatly reduce the demand on the radio network, allowing it to be utilised in other ways, and reduce signaller and driver workload, whilst providing timetable resilience benefits. The proposal could have wider application through its use on the West Highland Line.



**Automated train describer equipment**

### Request to Stop

The Press ‘n’ Ride concept is one that has been promoted to improve performance and reliability of trains at “request-only” stops. This would see the installation of an automated request system at each station whereby the driver would be aware of any waiting passenger/s in advance, via an alert to the conductor generated by the communications system. If there was no requirement to stop, this would allow the driver to maintain line speed and help improve reliability in the first instance and eventually reduce journey times.

## Identified Opportunities

A range of opportunities has been identified as a consequence of the workings of the Review Team and these include:

### Freight

It is positive to note that the train carrying pipes from Hartlepool to Georgemas Junction for the off-shore oil industry has restarted (photo). Hitrans has been leading on various discussions including the potential to restart timber movement by rail and these discussions are ongoing. There is a shared desire across both industries to find a workable solution.

### Tourism

Transport Scotland will work with the rail industry and stakeholders, including the North Highland Initiative, to explore a brand for the Far North Line and develop a detailed tourism pilot proposition with the aim of attracting more visitors on the line. There is clear potential to exploit the fact that the railway accesses parts of Sutherland and Caithness that are beyond the reach of the North Coast 500.

Transport Scotland intends to maintain the momentum stimulated by the Review Team through a single point of contact responsible for ensuring the consideration and, if appropriate, development and delivery of proposals with partners.



Photo: Leon Gray

## Review

- In March 2018 Transport Scotland published the [Rail Enhancements & Capital Investment Strategy](#), which set out the Scottish Ministers' commitment to investment in the rail network. The Strategy introduced a pipeline-based approach to rail project development and delivery.
- Utilising that process, the rail industry, led by Network Rail, is developing a Strategic Business Case for improvements in services on the Far North Line. Once this work concludes, investment recommendations will be presented to Transport Scotland who will assess the deliverability and affordability of the detailed options for potential implementation during Control Periods 6 and 7.
- A dedicated Transport Scotland project sponsor has been appointed to progress project development with Network Rail and ScotRail.

The Far North Line Review process has been successful. It has already identified and driven delivery of direct and ancillary benefits along the route, including new, sustainable employment in Helmsdale. It has also set a programme of potential further improvements on the corridor, the development of which has now commenced.

## Next Steps

Transport Scotland has approved further development work for the following:

- RETB Enhancements
  - Request to Stop
  - Automated Train Descriptor
  - Enhanced Token Transfer
- Linespeed Improvements
- Lentrane Loop Development
- Further RETB Enhancements
  - Collapsing tokens
  - Loop clear aids/automated loop clear
  - Automated inter cabinet fringing
  - Enhancements to user worked level crossings
- Strategic Business Case