

Projects -

4b Aberdeen-Inverness Rail

---

---

- Purpose of Report

The purpose of this report is to update the Board on potential enhancements to the Aberdeen-Inverness railway line, both in the short-term through an improved Sunday timetable and in the long-term through major infrastructure development.

- Background

Members will be aware of the importance of the Aberdeen-Inverness railway line in providing a key public transport link between the Oil Capital of Europe and the Capital of the Highlands. However, members will be aware that the line is severely restricted by being single line for much of its length. Proposals to enhance local rail services and travel between the two cities have been hampered by this restriction and limitations on the route.

Despite significant growth in recent years, notably at Dyce and Inverurie stations, the line has one of the lowest proportions of Sunday services compared to Monday-Saturday runnings in the country. Dyce for example, which provides a link to Aberdeen Airport has just five services in each direction on a Sunday (compared to 23 daily services in each direction).

- Sunday services

A report commissioned by Hitrans and Nestrans containing proposals for increasing the number of services on the route was considered by the Nestrans Board at its meeting on 1 July 2009. The route currently has one of the lowest ratios of Sunday:weekday services in the country and the Board agreed to include enhancements as a proposal in the Rail Action Plan and to engage with ScotRail, Transport Scotland and the Scottish Government to achieve better Sunday frequencies in the short term. The Board also agreed to allocate £25,000 from Nestrans' 2009/2010 revenue budget, in case there was a revenue shortfall which could prevent the proposal proceeding. Hitrans had also allocated funding.

However, this proposal has not been able to be progressed due to other priorities within ScotRail. The issue was raised at the recent timetabling conference attended by Rab Dickson for Nestrans and Frank Roach for Hitrans. The following is an extract from the draft minute:

- *“Inverness-Aberdeen Sundays : progress had not proved possible due to the ongoing calls of the Class 380 situation on ScotRail’s planning resources, and there was still work to be done on refining the consultant’s recommendations with a likelihood that one or two fewer services would be forthcoming than originally anticipated. ScotRail nevertheless remained keen to reach agreement with HITRANS and NESTRANS on revenue support for a trial period, and RD said that he would be happy to make budgetary provision. “*

It is therefore recommended that the Board agree to continue pressing for these enhancements, whilst recognising that difficulties with ScotRail’s Airdrie-Bathgate project

and the need for them to sort the difficulties with the rolling stock, which would then enable them to cascade trains which could be used in the north east.

- Network Rail study

Members will recall that the Strategic Transport Projects Review (STPR) produced by Transport Scotland in December 2008 indicated that an upgrade of the Aberdeen-Inverness line was a key priority

Transport Scotland instructed Network Rail to undertake a feasibility study into potential upgrade of the Aberdeen-Inverness rail line with the following objectives:

- To consider the constraint on the rail and road network caused by Inveramsay Bridge;
- An end-to-end rail journey time of less than two hours;
- A regular clockface timetable;
- A daytime frequency of one train per hour in each direction, with additional short runnings close to either end of the route; and
- Consideration of additional stops at Kintore and Dalcross (Inverness Airport).

It is understood that Network Rail have now produced a draft report and submitted that to Transport Scotland. Discussions indicate that these objectives can be achieved, that the Inveramsay Bridge issue is not a major problem for the rail services and that that project has therefore been passed to the Trunk Roads Division for further development and that initial estimates of the potential costs of such an upgrade could be achieved within the original STPR threshold of £250-500 million.

However, whilst this would appear to be good news for the north and north east, Transport Scotland have not yet accepted a final version of the report and have not shared it with either RTPs or local authorities. In particular, Nestrans would wish to progress the rail enhancements, but also other priority projects such as Kintore station. Without seeing the report it has not been possible to comment on technical aspects and contribute to progressing the proposals.

- Recommendation

It is recommended that the Board:

1. Note the above proposals and the progress which has been possible;
2. Provide funding in future budgets to ensure continued progress and development as appropriate, including an allocation to make a contribution towards any revenue shortfall on Sunday enhancements between Aberdeen and Inverness;
3. seek assurances from Transport Scotland that they will share the findings of the Network Rail report on upgrading the line; and
4. instruct officers to press for early progress on these projects, including Kintore station and report back to a future Board meeting.