

Parliamentary Questions Asked by FoFNL Vice Presidents

General Question Time

30 Jan 2020

Rail Infrastructure (Highlands)

John Finnie (Highlands and Islands) (Green):

To ask the Scottish Government what plans it has for improving rail infrastructure in the Highlands. (S5O-04082)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Infrastructure and Connectivity (Michael Matheson):

The recent £57 million Highland mainline investment has delivered performance and resilience improvements, and, by May 2020, there will be around a 10-minute journey-time saving between Inverness and the central belt. The £330 million Aberdeen to Inverness project has delivered a new station at Forres and a half-hourly service between Aberdeen and Inverurie. Additional services between Inverness and Elgin are planned for May 2020. Looking forward, the second strategic transport projects review is under way to identify the transport investment priorities for the next 20 years, and it will include Scotland's rail network.

John Finnie:

I thank the cabinet secretary for that response, but what he said is at odds with the Inverness city region deal, which makes no mention of rail or trains but has £64 million for the so-called west link and £109 million for the so-called east link. A modest passing loop at Lentrane would increase capacity to not only the west but the north and would obviate the need for the ridiculous flyover that is proposed for the south side of the Kessock bridge. When is the Scottish Government going to prioritise public transport?

Michael Matheson:

We do prioritise public transport. The member will be aware that the Inverness and Highland city region deal has been shaped by local partners, recognising the key strategic investments that are necessary to support and create inclusive economic growth in the Highlands. There is no doubt in my mind that providing the right road infrastructure is critical to that.

Alongside that, as I have just outlined, we have invested £330 million in the rail line between Inverness and Aberdeen and nearly £60 million in the Highland mainline. As I also set out, through the STPR2 process, we will look to make further strategic investments—including in rail, such as in the Highland mainline—to make sure that we continue investing in our public transport as we have in recent years.

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Scottish Labour): *To ask the Scottish Government whether improvements to double tracking of railway lines north of Perth and serving the Highlands will be undertaken before electrification of lines.* [S5W-29322]

Michael Matheson: The Scottish Government is committed to publishing the rail services decarbonisation action plan for Scotland's railways, this will include its assessment on the use of battery and hydrogen technology powered trains as well as electrification to meet the 2035 traction decarbonisation target. Other infrastructure works may also be required to fully capture the benefits and these will be assessed on each line of route based on current and forecast capacity.

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Scottish Labour): *To ask the Scottish Government what discussions it has had with the ScotRail franchise operators, Abellio, since 1 January 2020 regarding improvements to the Far North Line.* [S5W-29321]

Michael Matheson: Network Rail is currently developing a Business Case to support the recommendations of the Far North Line review group. Abellio ScotRail has also been involved in discussions to assess the deliverability and affordability of the options for potential implementation during the next eight to ten years.

Early work had, prior to the Covid-19 disruption, started on developing and trialling enhancements to the Radio Electronic Token Block signalling on the line and this will re-commence as soon as it is safe to do so.

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Scottish Labour): *To ask the Scottish Government what consideration it has given to supporting the use of battery and hydrogen technology-powered trains on the Far North Line.* [S5W-29320]

Michael Matheson: The Scottish Government is committed to publishing the rail services decarbonisation action plan for Scotland's railways, this will include its assessment on the use of battery and hydrogen technology powered trains as well as electrification to meet the 2035 traction decarbonisation target.