

# 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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## Open Letter to The Highland Council

The Friends of the Far North Line is alarmed at the turn taken by recent discussions concerning the Scottish Government's plans to dual the A96 and the remainder of the A9 between Inverness and Perth. The spending of money on roads instead of railways continues to directly affect the passengers on our line as they travel beyond Inverness. We find ourselves still waiting for the improvements to the Highland Main Line promised in the Strategic Transport Policy Review of 2008 which were quietly dropped in favour of the dualling of the A9.

Most rail campaigners are also car drivers and we fully understand the frustration of being held behind freight vehicles when we could have been doing 70 mph if it were dual carriageway. Realistically though, the time savings we could have made would have been unlikely to equate to more than 15-20 minutes on the full journey between Inverness and Perth for example, so journey time is not the main issue. For any remaining freight vehicles, dualling the road would have made no difference as the speed limit of 50 mph would not have changed.

It has been interesting to watch the arguments being deployed to persuade the Scottish Government to proceed with the road dualling projects. These are mostly about safety and connectivity.

### Safety

- average speed cameras on the A9 have already been very successful
- erecting far more 'Single Carriageway' reminder signs and the use of directional arrows on the road surface would help to avoid the confusion mentioned by The Highland Council
- ironic to see traffic accident statistics being used to justify more expenditure on roads when deaths and injuries per passenger mile are so few on rail that in many years they are non-existent
- notable that when demands are made for dualling the A9 and A96 only the shocking headline figures for road deaths in the whole of the Highlands and North East are mentioned, not the numbers for the sections of road in question
- even one death on the roads is too many, which is one of the reasons why we need to reduce the amount of road traffic
- safety gains to be made by moving as much road traffic as possible, especially freight, to the parallel rail routes, are far greater than those to be achieved by dualling roads
- a combination of modal shift and the enhanced drivers' warnings mentioned above will tackle most of the current road safety concerns very effectively

### Connectivity

- something of a red herring in the case of the A9 since a fast road already exists
- the need for work on the A96 will be much reduced once a lot of the traffic is removed as a result of modal shift

- clearly it is not healthy for the residents of the towns which have yet to be by-passed to have through traffic, so this does need to be addressed, but dual carriageway for the entire route is unnecessary, especially when the parallel railway has so much potential for enhancement
- double track railway lines are capable of carrying huge amounts of freight and large numbers of passengers in safety and can provide rapid, reliable, connections over long distances

The job of government, both local and national, is to look at the complete picture and make judgments about what is required to address the need to save energy. Scotland's current National Transport Strategy explains this in terms of a journey-choice hierarchy with walking and wheeling at the top, followed by cycling, then public transport, then taxis and shared transport, with the (electric) private car at the bottom. In Highland terms this clearly places the needs of the railway ahead of the parallel road routes. There will never be unlimited funds, so choices have to be made based on the imperatives that exist.

Continuing our present driving habits – even with electric cars - is not sustainable because it would simply require too much electricity. We need to collaborate in making our travel consume the least possible resources, and to do this the railway offers by far the best option where available. The Highland Council is well aware of the present shortcomings of Highland railways. THC should therefore be visibly proactive in the campaign to bring the railways up to the required standards.

The rail links, especially Inverness to Perth and Inverness to Aberdeen, lag far behind road provision and only got worse during the twentieth century:

- almost entirely single track with a very few passing places
- the need for railway capacity to service the impending modal shift is acute - this is where dualling is needed
- the cost of dualling the remainder of the A9 and A96 south and east of Inverness could be spent on rail upgrades instead, allowing thousands of 44 tonne lorries to be removed from the roads and enabling rail journey times to the Central Belt to be quicker than they currently are by car, a requirement stated by Alex Salmond in Inverness in 2008

Unfortunately The Highland Council, far from supporting moves to change Scottish transport priorities, is calling for spending on road upgrades as though there is no Climate Emergency. This is not a good look for Scotland as delegates arrive for the COP26 conference in Glasgow to work out ways to reduce the use of fossil fuels in particular, and the use of power in general. Heads must be pulled out of the sand in the face of the emergency. It is well known that, especially for freight, rail represents a massive fuel saving compared with road transport powered by any means.

We ask The Highland Council, and all the area's newspapers, to fully back calls for upgrading the intercity rail links from Inverness as soon as possible, and to provide leadership in helping us all to change our transport habits.

**The Friends of the Far North Line - 12 October 2021**