

TRANSFORMING THE HIGHLAND MAIN LINE: AN URGENT TASK

The project to dual the A9 between Perth and Inverness is prominent both on the ground and in the Press. Not so the 3rd priority of the Strategic Transport Project Review of 2008, which was making the HML fit for purpose for both passenger and freight service demand.

The total enhancements in place by the end of Control Period 5 this March, will have about as much significance, compared with what's needed, as the rebuilding of Croy and Bishopbriggs stations around twenty years ago had in relation to the size of the Edinburgh Glasgow Improvement Programme. The HML improvement work over the last ten years is minute compared to what was promised in the First Minister's Declaration of Inverness in 2008.

Why has the HML been allowed to languish? The Queensferry Crossing and EGIP which were 1st and 2nd priorities are now largely completed. The HML is Scotland's strategic railway to the north of Scotland serving the Moray Firth area and destinations along the connecting lines towards Moray, Caithness and the north west coast. Resources related to the timber and whisky industries could again be carried by rail as both are expanding hugely. The Highlands is second only to Edinburgh as a tourist destination, and business and leisure travel in both directions would increase considerably if the line were fit for purpose. The Scottish Chambers of Commerce has told Government that single track railways between the northern cities are unacceptable in the 21st century.

It is recognised that it is currently quicker to drive between the Central Belt and Inverness and that the promised major improvements to the line must be completed before the A9 is fully transformed or there will be reverse modal shift of freight and passengers in favour of the road sending a juggernaut through the Government's emissions reduction policies. Time is running out.

A number of schemes to quickly improve the HML during financial Control Period 6 (2019-2024) are suggested below. (The figures in brackets refer to Network Rail's Scotland Route Study of 2016).

STANLEY JUNCTION AND ON TO MURTHLY

Stanley Junction remodelling was in the list of

projects a few years ago, but never happened. The idea was to create a gentler and faster curve with a high speed point interface with the end of the double track from Perth.

In view of the frequency with which northbound trains have to be held here awaiting late trains coming off the single track from Dunkeld, it would make sense to double the 3 miles on from Stanley Jnc to Murthly where there used to be a crossing loop. This would reduce the length of the ensuing single track section to 5¾ miles and reduce any delay times.

DALGUISE TO BALLINLUIG

Create a new track northwards to the former long loop at Ballinluig from the Dalguise viaduct. Build it alongside, but on a higher embankment than, the present line. This is most important to increase the resilience of the line from flooding, the latest iteration of which closed the line on 18 December 2018. Once this new line is in use, the old one could be closed and its embankment raised before reopening again.

The result would be doubly beneficial, with a new stretch of dual track and a line able to resist the flooding which has been such a problem in the last few years.

DALWHINNIE TOWARDS CRUBENMORE

Continue the double track northward from Dalwhinnie along the level for 3 miles through Cuaich towards Crubenmore. This 13 mile section is another of the bottlenecks on the line with trains frequently having to wait at Dalwhinnie for a train to struggle up the gradient through Glen Truim. The 19.42 Edinburgh to Inverness had its schedule extended by six minutes from Mondays to Fridays to allow extra time for the Caledonian Sleeper to get up the hill. At that time of night passengers would much prefer the train to arrive in Inverness at its former time of 23.10 rather than at 23.16!

MAKE SURE THE A9 DUALLING DOES NOT PREVENT DOUBLING OF THE RAILWAY ALONG THIS STRETCH THROUGH GLEN TRUIM WHERE RAIL AND ROAD RUN CLOSE TOGETHER.

NEWTONMORE TO KINGUSSIE

Provide double track from north of the Spey

viaduct through the former Newtonmore station loop for 3 level miles to Kingussie. (6.6.5).

Taken together with the previous suggestion (above) this would leave only 7 miles of Glen Truim bank as single track. Ideally it would be good to dual the bank as well eventually but it would be a more expensive project. There used to be passing loops at Inchlea (4 miles N of Dalwhinnie) and at Etteridge (7 miles N of Dalwhinnie) which together with Newtonmore Loop made sections of 4, 3, 3 and 3 miles long between Dalwhinnie and Kingussie).

KINGUSSIE TO KINCRAIG

Construct a parallel line on a higher embankment for the 6 miles between Kingussie and Kincraig to improve resilience and prevent closure when flooding at Insh Marshes gets too high. Then raise the embankment on the existing 100 mph line and thus create a 6 mile double track section. (6.6.5).

At the same time, a solution should be found for the course of the Gynack Burn which causes flooding problems at Kingussie station.

MOY TO CULLODEN MOOR

Redouble the section from Culloden Moor to Daviot and extend formation to create a second track from Daviot to the top of the hill at Moy to create 8 miles of double track on the steep climb out of Inverness.

FURTHER WORK

It is recognised that there are sections of the line which it would be very difficult to double, such as through Killiecrankie. With the current diesel traction it would be beneficial to double the line over the steeper hill sections such as Tomatin to Slochd, Carr Bridge to Slochd, Newtonmore to Crubenmore and Dunkeld to Kingswood (where a tunnel is also involved).

Improved and faster services on the line also depend on other work elsewhere, such as removing the crippling speed restrictions either side of Perth station and constructing the Greenhill Flyover to improve access to Glasgow. Providing a loop at Newburgh on the single track line between Perth and Edinburgh, until such time as the direct electrified railway route through Kinross-shire is constructed, would help too. The Kinross line would also ease congestion on the coastal route through Kirkcaldy and save 30 minutes in journey

time between Edinburgh and Perth, a huge advantage for HML and further north passengers too!

CUMULATIVE OUTCOME

Taken together doubling these HML sections would give around 25 more miles of double track to add to the 37 miles already doubled between Perth and Inverness, leaving 56 miles single with 62 miles double on the 118 mile long route. It would be a really significant improvement to benefit both passenger and freight traffic.

Dualing the easier stages between Stanley Junction and Culloden Moor (as suggested above) first of all could also help to prepare the line for electrification. As is well known, electrification is particularly beneficial in reducing journey time on steep gradients (the Beattock effect). Presumably, electrification is still being thought about for the Government's aspiration date of 2030 when the refurbished InterCity HSTs may require to be retired from service.

More pressing is to get the HML into much better condition to compete with the dualled A9 which is due to be completed in 2025. Providing a much faster journey time with greater track capacity for both passenger and freight services is essential to make rail the attractive and sustainable transport mode of choice preventing any modal switch from rail towards road which would be contrary to Scottish Government policy.

As the First Minister said in the context of the Katowice climate change conference in December 2018:

"We have a moral responsibility to do what we can to prevent and mitigate the effects of global climate change.

"Scotland has been widely praised internationally for our work to tackle climate change, and I am absolutely determined that there will be no let-up in our efforts.

"It requires everyone in society – individuals, businesses and governments – to play their part in changing behaviours."

Therefore, we must make a big effort to complete a major transformation of the Highland Main Line strategic route for Scotland during the next five or six years.

Richard Ardern