

Evanton Station

Technical Feasibility Study

HITRANS

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Quality information

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1. Introduction

HITRANS have commissioned AECOM to investigate the technical and operational feasibility of introducing a new rail station at Evanton on the Far North Line. This commission aims to study how a potential station at Evanton would impact on current rail services in terms of capacity, and to understand the infrastructure changes as a result of the Far North Line Enhancements programme (which follows on from the government-led Far North Line Review Team's findings).

The note is structured as follows:

- **Section 2** presents high level context around Evanton Station, including historic discussion regarding the station reopening, and latest planning developments, such as the successful Inverness and Cromarty Firth bid for Green Freeport status, which could impact potential demand for a station at Evanton;
- **Section 3** sets out the findings from a review into the technical feasibility of reintroducing Evanton Station, with consideration given to the suitability of existing track alignment, topography, available land, additional infrastructure required and other potential constraints;
- **Section 4** sets out the findings from an assessment undertaken to understand the potential operational impacts of stopping trains at a reintroduced Evanton station; and
- **Section 5** provides a summary of the findings from the study and proposed next steps.

2. Context

The re-opening of Evanton Station has been under discussion for some years and comes on the back of station re-opening on the Far North Line at Beaully and Conon Bridge in 2002 and 2013 respectively. The proposal would provide low-carbon sustainable travel connectivity from Evanton to neighbouring towns, and the city of Inverness, supporting travel for work, education and leisure.

The proposed station would contribute to decarbonisation of transport in the area, aligning with Transport Scotland's National Transport Strategy¹ policy on the hierarchy of transport modes, and with the Rail Services Decarbonisation Action Plan².

HITRANS Regional Transport Strategy Refresh (2018)³ set out in its delivery plan the intention "to reverse the decline on the Far North Line, including rail journey time improvements, capacity enhancements, passing loops, improved line speed, Evanton Rail Station feasibility; signalling upgrade and frequency improvements". A full update of the Regional Transport Strategy is currently underway and the Case for Change report⁴ was published in September 2022. This report identified a problem with journey times, due to people having to change trains or change between train and bus. A supply side cause associated with this problem was identified as the "absence of stations in settlements with a railway line", with Evanton given as a specific example of this.

The proposed Inner Moray Firth Local Development Plan 2023⁵ notes the continued aspiration to re-open the Rail Halt at Evanton, acknowledging that this would be subject to a STAG appraisal to assess viability. The LDP identifies three key housing development sites in Evanton:

- Teandallon – 140 houses
- Southeast of Evanton Bridge – 30 houses
- Drummond Farm – 15 houses

The Housing Land Audit 2022⁶ sets out a further site at Culcairn with an allocation of 160 houses. This gives a total allocation of 345 additional houses in the Evanton area which could generate potential demand for the station.

¹ <https://www.transport.gov.scot/publication/national-transport-strategy-2/>

² <https://www.transport.gov.scot/media/47906/rail-services-decarbonisation-action-plan.pdf>

³ https://hitrans.org.uk/userfiles/file/Regional_Transport_Strategy_Refresh_2018.pdf

⁴ <https://hitrans.org.uk/userfiles/file/20230705%20HITRANS%20Case%20for%20Change%20POST%20CONSULTATION.pdf>

⁵

https://www.highland.gov.uk/info/178/local_and_statutory_development_plans/202/inner_moray_firth_local_development_plan

⁶ https://www.highland.gov.uk/downloads/file/26460/housing_land_audit_2022_document

The LDP also identifies a number of Economic Development Areas in the local area, including at Highland Deephaven, which is approximately 40 minutes' walk from the proposed Evanton Station site, as well as sites at Inverness Airport Business Park and Dalcross Industrial Estate which can be accessed via the rail network due to the recently opened railway station at Inverness Airport. The plan notes that achieving a rail halt would provide an alternative to driving cars for longer journeys made by residents of Evanton, and it could also provide an environmentally sustainable transport connection for employment at Highland Deephaven.

The recent successful Inverness and Cromarty Firth bid for Green Freeport status⁷ is set to "revolutionise" the Highland economy and stimulate major new manufacturing activity locally, creating up to 10,250 jobs. Many of these are likely to be based in locations accessible by the rail network, including notably the port itself; a ten minute walk from Invergordon railway station. This potentially transformational change for the area presents a clear opportunity to establish and lock in sustainable travel behaviours, aligning with the "Green" aspect of the Freeport.

3. Technical Feasibility

3.1 Introduction

This section sets out the technical feasibility of reintroducing a station within the village of Evanton (historically served by Novar Station, closed 1960). The potential site identified is situated approximately 180m north of the historical site at approximately 25 miles 240 yards on the WCK line between Dingwall and Alness stations.

The engineering feasibility of providing a new single 15m long station halt at this site is explored below, with consideration given to:

- Suitability of existing track alignment
- Topography/required earthworks
- Available land
- Additional infrastructure required
- Other potential constraints

This is a desk-based study using only the following available information;

- Routeview
- Bing Maps
- Google Streetview
- National Library of Scotland – historical OS maps
- 5-mile diagrams

3.2 Site Overview

The identified site is within the village of Evanton on the bi-directional WCK line at approximately 25 miles 240 yards. The track in this area is bound to the north west by the B817 carriageway which acts as a main thoroughfare for the village and provides access to the A9 both to the north and south. Residential properties are situated along the B817 as shown in Figure 1 (overleaf). To the south east of the proposed station location is agriculture land and the A9 carriageway.

An RETB (radio electronic token block) mast is located within the railway boundary immediately south of the proposed location, alongside an unsurfaced layby/parking area separated from the B817 by a retained grass verge. Immediately to the north of the suggested platform location, the railway boundary narrows making it unsuitable without land acquirement.

⁷ <https://greenfreeport.scot/>

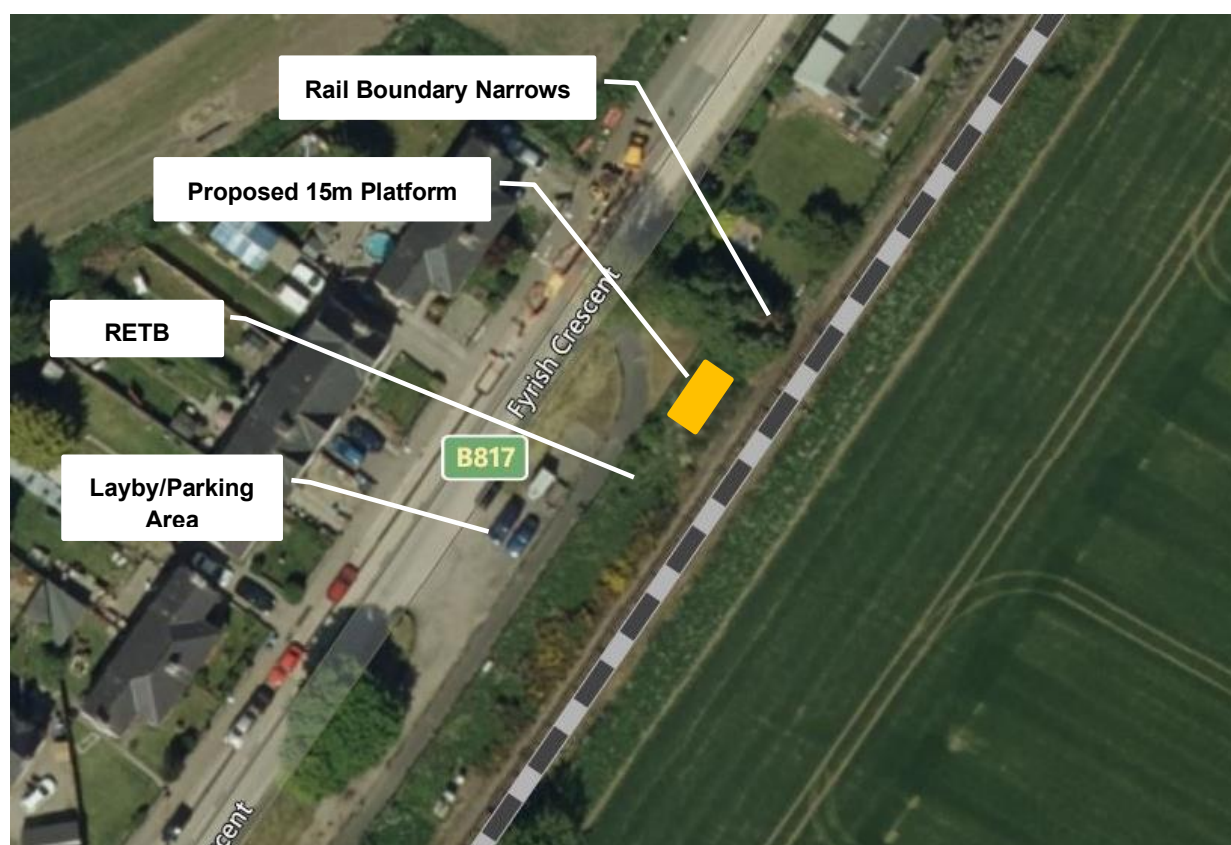


Figure 1 – Proposed Evanton Station Site Overview

3.3 Existing Track

RSSB standard RIS-7016-INS, Issue One, June 2019, Clause 2.1.1 states that new platforms should not be located on horizontal curves with radii less than 1000m. Section 2.2 sets out the limitations on gradients through stations and explains that the previous requirement for a maximum gradient of 1:500 was removed from standard GI/RT/7016 following RSSB research report T815 'Limits on vertical track alignment through station platforms'. However, the Infrastructure (INF) TSI (Cl. 4.2.4.4(1)) still imposes a maximum gradient of 1:400

The vertical alignment in this area is on a relatively shallow gradient of 1:600 falling from south to north. As identified above, this is compliant with the Infrastructure TSI standard.

The horizontal alignment local to the site is on a straight section which again is compliant with standards.

3.4 Civil Engineering

The railway in the area appears to be at-grade on the west, with a small cutting on the east. It is assumed that the fence lines along the public footpath and along the crest of the cutting are the Network Rail boundary lines (shown as dashed lines in Figure 2 overleaf).

The area of land identified for the proposed platform measures approximately 9.5m in width between the running edge and the fence line; with a distance between the RETB mast and residential/private fence line of approximately 60m.

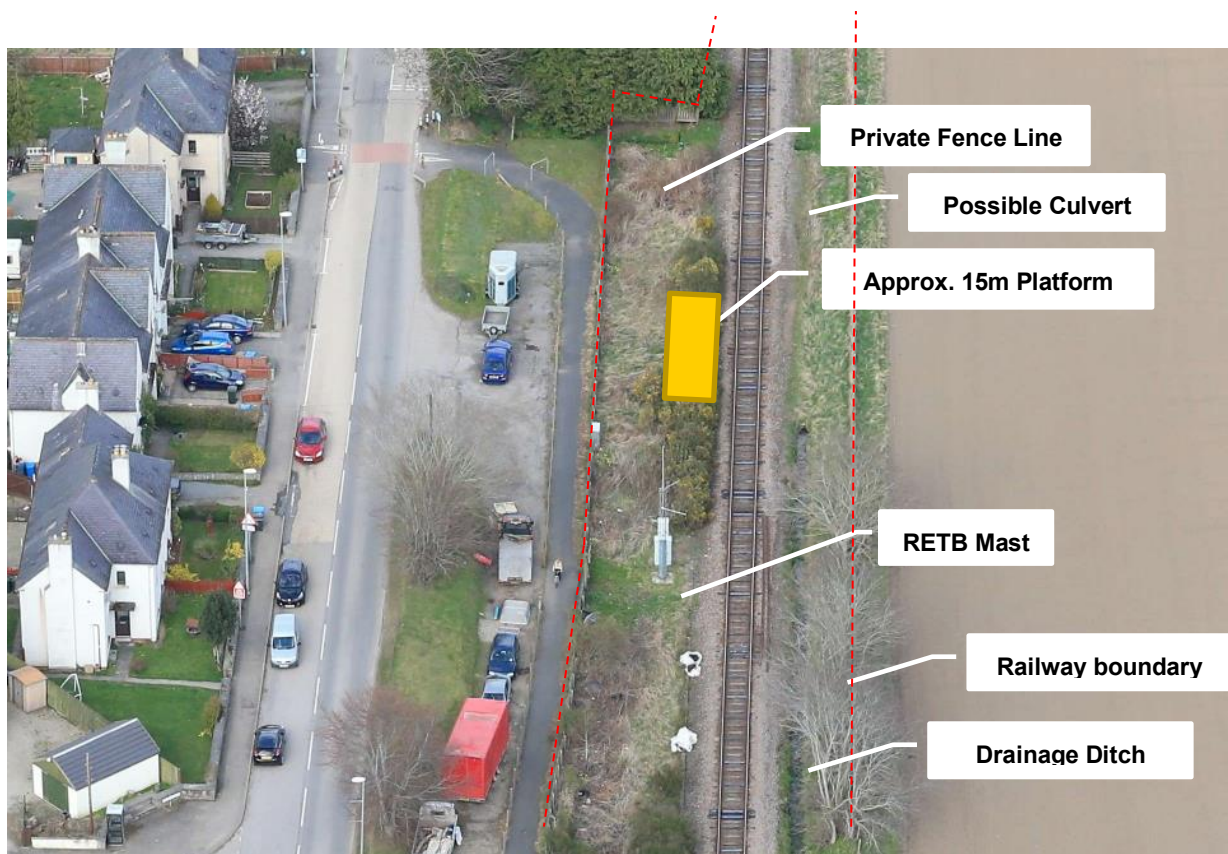


Figure 2 – Routeview Capture from April 2018 (Facing North-East)

A minimum platform width of 2.5m is required in accordance with standard GIRT7020 for linespeeds up to 100mph and 3m where linespeeds exceed 100mph. An operational platform length of 15m has been agreed in principle with stakeholders based on similar recently commissioned request-to-stop stations on the route e.g. Conon Bridge and Beaully. This reduced platform geometry could fit comfortably within the identified site with some scope to either ‘fine tune’ the final location or provide a longer/wider platform as required. Additional width could be utilised for station furniture such as benches or waiting shelters.

Given the local topography appearing to be at grade, DDA compliant access could be provided to the new platform via the existing footpath/cycling route which runs alongside the railway without any requirement for structural ramps.

Ground investigation works would have to take account of both the land inside and outside the railway boundary to inform the design of the platform and accesses.

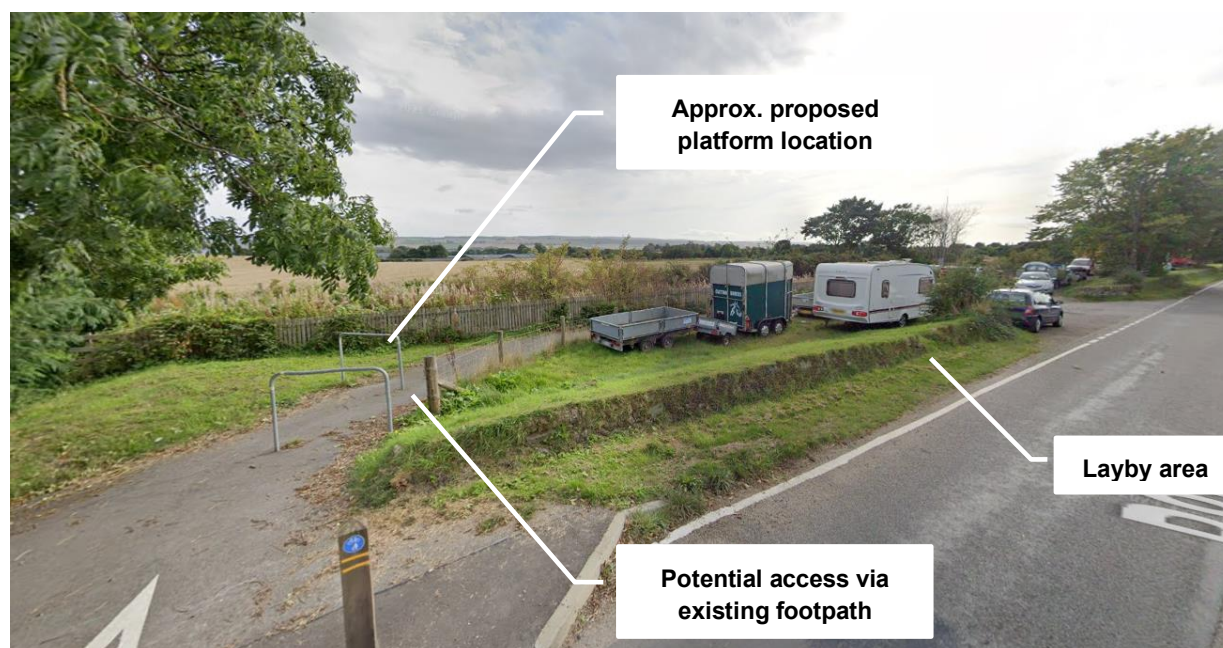


Figure 3 – Google Streetview Capture

The layby area between the rail boundary and B817, as shown in Figure 3, would potentially offer a suitable space for a small station car park. The provision of disabled parking and EV charging points should also be considered moving forward as well as any Distribution Network Operator (DNO) provision/requirements for lighting and/or Station Info & Security Systems (SISS) provision if deemed a requirement.

3.5 Summary

Overall, from an engineering perspective, the site appears to be suitable to accommodate a 15m long platform with no evident complexities. Although temporary land access and perhaps acquirement of the layby for any permanent station car parking would be required, the permanent works would be contained entirely within the railway boundary. Similar to recently commissioned stations at Conon Bridge and Beauly, provision of lighting and/or SISS will require power connectivity to be considered.

4. Operational Feasibility

4.1 Introduction

This operational assessment has been prepared using AECOM's in-house rail modelling spreadsheet tool ARTEM to calculate the journey time impacts of stopping rail services at Evanton.

4.2 Far North Line

Evanton lies on the Far North Line, which runs northwards from Inverness via the towns of Dingwall, Tain, and Golspie to two end points in Wick and Thurso, approximately 165 kilometres (100 miles) away. The line follows much of the northern section of the A9 road, except for a diversion via Lairg between Tain and Golspie. The line passes through the village between Dingwall and Alness stations, but there is currently no station nearby. The closest station is Alness, approximately 7 kilometres (4 miles) away. The railway line has only a single track for trains to travel along in both directions, except for some limited locations of passing loops, or station loops as they are mostly at station locations. This restricts the movement of trains along the line and constrains their schedule. Trains can pass one another along the line at the following locations: Muir of Ord, Dingwall, Invergordon, Tain, Ardgay, Lairg, Rogart, Brora, Helmsdale, and Forsinard. These all have two platforms for passenger use.

Between Inverness and Dingwall, the Far North Line shares its track with the Kyle Line, a route which diverges westward (towards its end point in the village of Kyle of Lochalsh) immediately north of Dingwall station.

Trains are signalled along the route using a system called Radio Electronic Token Block (RETB). To ensure the safety of trains, only one is ever given access to a predetermined length of track, called a section, at the same

time. Using RETB, a 'token' transmitted by radio to the train gives its driver permission to proceed through each section. In 2022, a new system was rolled out where a button connected with the RETB system was fitted to each station which is a request stop. Pressing the button will give the driver of the approaching train an indication that someone is waiting to board.

4.3 Baseline Timetable

The May 2023 passenger service which passes the potential station site between Dingwall and Alness is irregular. The Monday - Saturday timetable is summarised in Table 1.

Inverness Departure Time	Destination	Inverness Arrival Time	Origin
0700	Wick	0743	Ardgay
1041	Wick	0812	Lairg
1400	Wick	1038	Wick
1450	Invergordon	1227	Wick
1712	Ardgay	1646	Invergordon
1831	Wick	1706	Wick
2129	Tain	2012	Wick
-	-	2058	Ardgay
-	-	2354	Tain

Table 1 – May 2023 passenger service Mondays – Saturdays

Source: Network Rail

The directional imbalance is explained by an empty train which leaves Inverness at 0441 for Lairg, detaching a portion at Ardgay. In addition to the above services, a train leaves Inverness for Dingwall at 1142 and then works back to Inverness at 1245 following a layover at Dingwall of 24 minutes. It may be possible for this service to be extended to and from Evanton.

The Sunday timetable is summarised in Table 2.

Inverness Departure Time	Destination	Inverness Arrival Time	Origin
0940	Tain	1208	Tain
1253	Tain	1517	Tain
1754	Wick	1615	Wick
2108	Tain	2333	Tain

Table 2 – May 2023 passenger service Sundays

Source: Network Rail

All of the passenger services on the route are formed of a two car class 158 Diesel Multiple Unit (DMU), which has a top speed of 90 miles / hour and approximately 135 seats.

All trains call at all stations on Sundays (except for Dunrobin Castle, out of season, or after dark), but not every service calls at every station in the Monday - Saturday timetable. The most notable examples which affect the Evanton area are the 1041 from Inverness to Wick which does not call at Beauly or Conon Bridge, and the 1600 from Wick to Inverness (arriving at 2012) which does not call at Fearn, Alness, Conon Bridge or Beauly. In addition to this, a number of the request stops are not observed even on request on some services.

The timetable, in its current form, is structured around the allocation of resources (traincrew and units). It is therefore very difficult to make significant changes without infrastructure intervention.

4.4 Impact of stopping at Evanton

The impact on the 'raw' journey time (excluding station dwell time or token exchange time) due to slowing down to stop at Evanton and then accelerating back up to line speed has been calculated for a Class 158 train to be 38 seconds in the Up direction (towards Inverness) and 40 seconds in the Down direction. The speed profile without and with a call at Evanton is shown in Figure 4 and Figure 5 below.

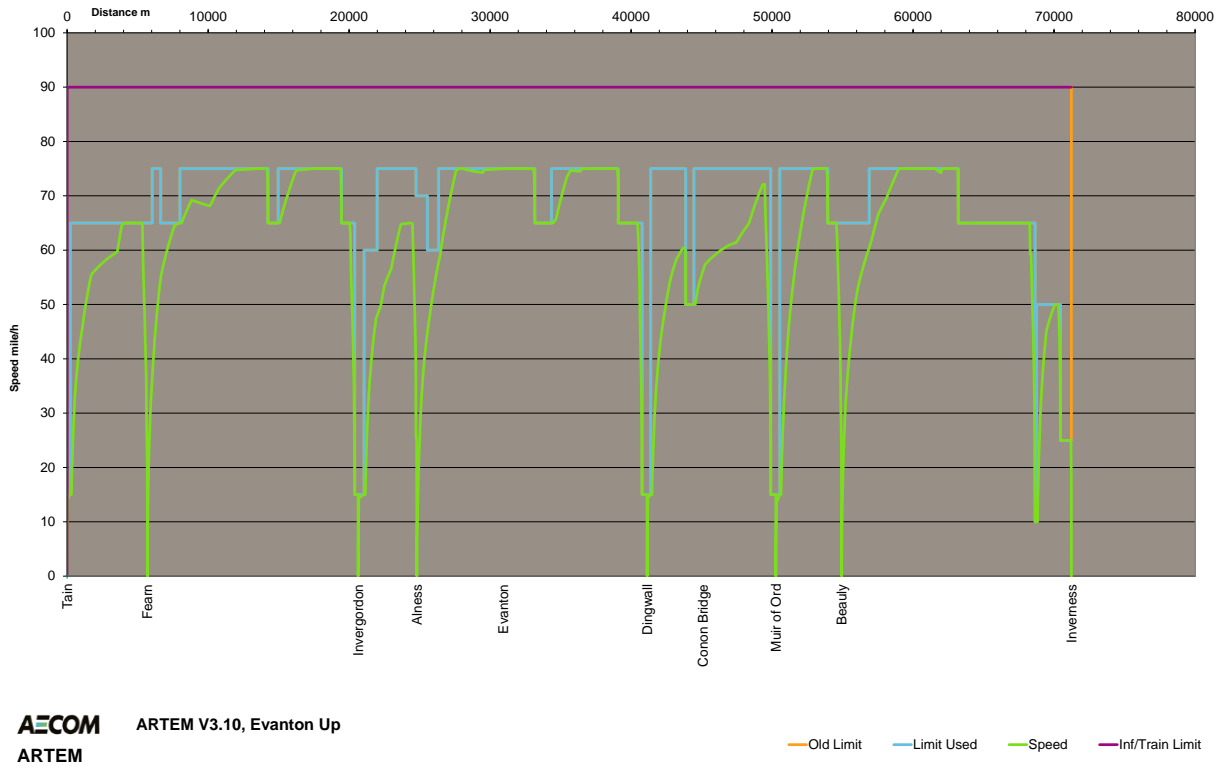


Figure 4 – Class 158 raw running time - without Evanton call

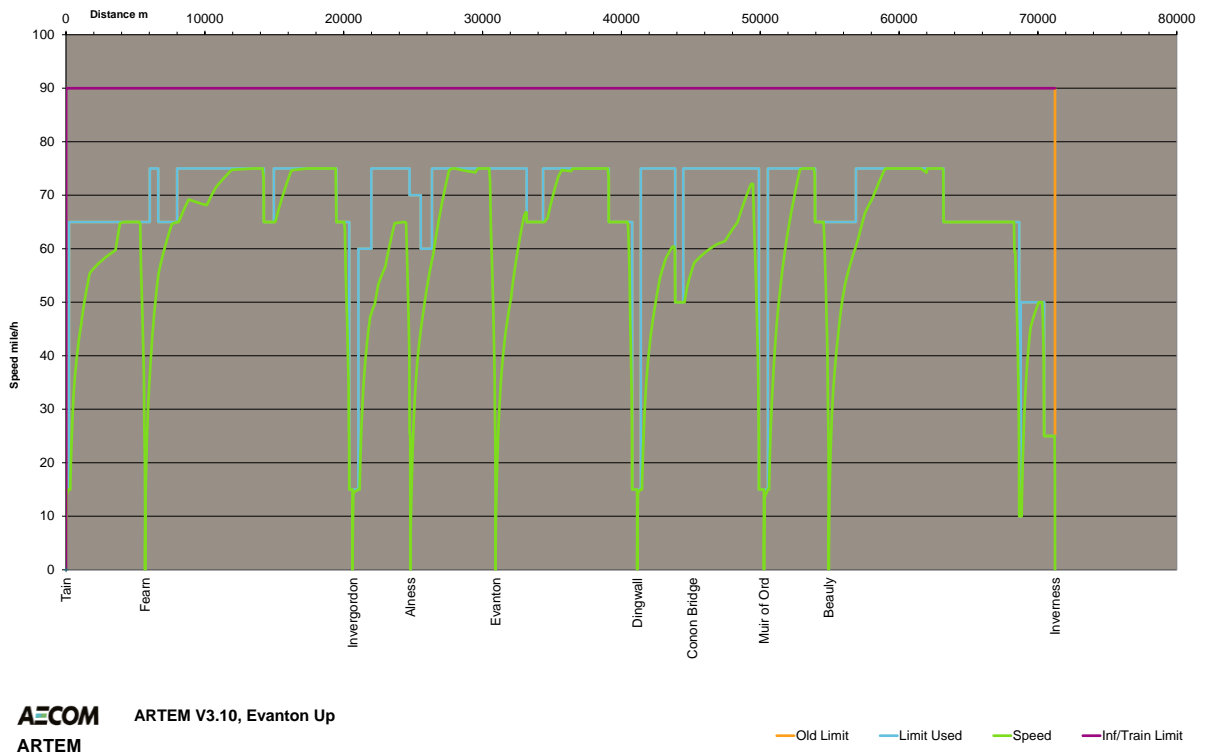


Figure 5 – Class 158 raw running time - with Evanton call

4.5 Scope to Insert Station Calls at Evanton

4.5.1 Baseline

Adding in the extra time to call at Evanton into the Wick services in both directions is challenging due to the need to pass services coming in the opposite direction at fixed locations. For shorter distance services, more potential

calls are possible. The graphical presentation of the timetable below helps to visualise which services are in scope to stop at Evanton.

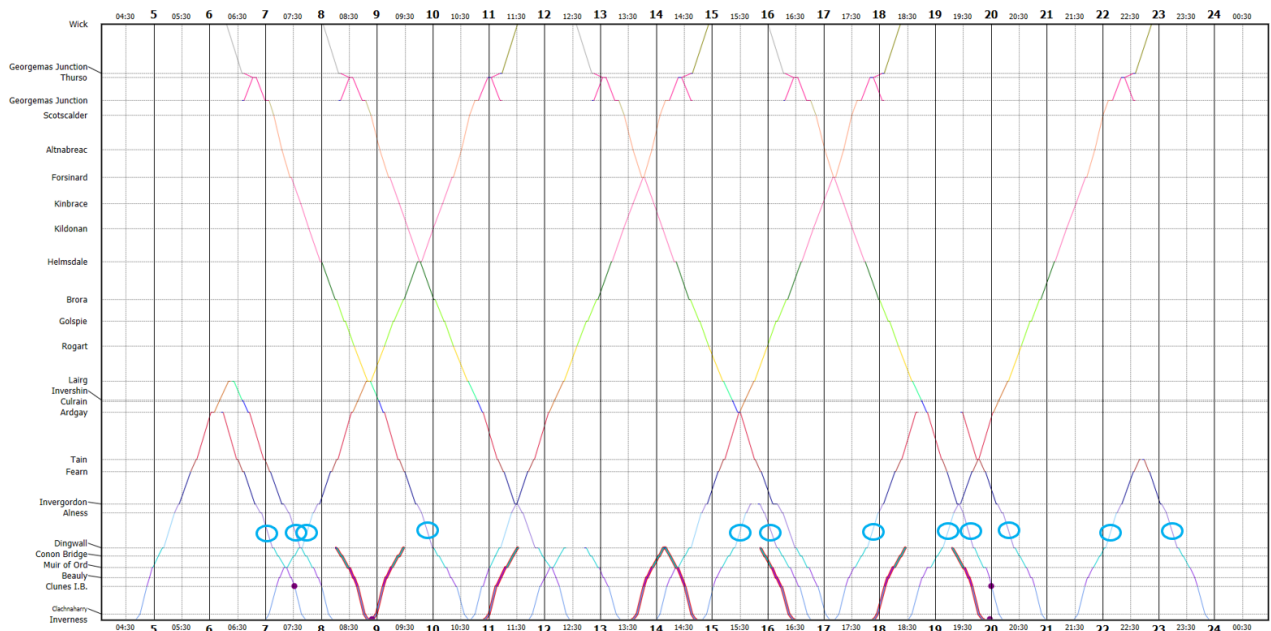


Figure 6 – Train graph showing the current scheduled passenger timetable* on the Far North & Kyle lines, with the possible added stops at Evanton circled in blue

**Notes - The first service of the day running from Inverness to Lairg is an empty stock move which does not carry passengers. The above screenshot does not include charter trains, freight and test trains which may influence the level of flexibility with regards to the re-timing of services*

In summary, there are 12 services per day out of the 17 which pass Evanton which could be able to call at the site with two in the morning peak towards Inverness, arriving at Inverness between 07:00 and 10:00 and two in the evening peak that run towards Tain, departing Inverness between 16:00 and 19:00. Some of the Wick services are not likely to be able to make an additional call at Evanton as they are booked to pass services in the other direction at Tain, Lairg, Helmsdale or Forsinard.

All services highlighted above would need minor re-timing in order to accommodate the extra stop at Evanton. In the main this could potentially be found within the turnaround time of the trains at Inverness. As there are no flat crossing movements outside Inverness station, it is likely that this could generally be achieved within the current station layout and by shortening existing turnaround times. Table 3 shows revised turnarounds, assuming no re-timing. The shortest turnarounds and the beginning and end of the day could potentially be extended and accommodated by re-timing earlier/later as they do not pass other trains. At Invergordon, the turnaround time is reduced, but assuming the train arrives and departs from the Down platform this could be accommodated within the Timetable Planning Rules minimum allowance of 5 minutes.

Service	Scenario	Arrive	Depart	Turnaround (hh:mm:ss)
Inverness to Lairg	without Evanton	06:20:00	06:26:00	00:06:00
	with Evanton	06:21:30	06:26:00	00:04:30
Inverness to Invergordon	without Evanton	15:41:00	15:51:00	00:10:00
	with Evanton	15:42:30	15:49:30	00:07:00
Inverness to Ardgay	without Evanton	18:39:00	19:29:00	00:50:00
	with Evanton	18:40:30	19:29:00	00:48:30
Inverness to Tain	without Evanton	22:39:00	22:44:00	00:05:00
	with Evanton	22:40:30	22:44:00	00:03:30

Table 3 – Revised turnarounds

Services which have a call at the new station inserted into their schedule will offer a slower journey time than at present for those travelling between Alness (and all stations north thereof) and stations Dingwall to Inverness inclusive. This will result in longer journey times for existing passengers. It is estimated that the additional time to slow down to call at the new station, allow passengers on and off and then accelerate back up to the prevailing line speed would be about two minutes on most services. For example, in the morning peak, a slightly earlier departure from Ardgay and Lairg are required on busy arrivals at Inverness. In the evening peak, the service terminating at Ardgay would arrive approximately 2 minutes later at every station from Alness onwards, and a second service would need to depart from Inverness approximately 2 minutes earlier to accommodate the call.

4.5.2 Future Timetable Aspirations and Associated Infrastructure

Various stakeholders have aspirations for additional services to operate on the Far North line. Network Rail is therefore developing revised timetables and developing designs for the associated engineering interventions required to accommodate additional frequency and improve timetable robustness. Interventions under consideration include:

- A new passing loop and token exchange point at Delmore, between Clachnaharry and Beauly;
- Improvements to the token exchange point at Muir of Ord; and
- Linespeed improvements at various locations.

At the time the operational assessment for this study was undertaken in July 2023, this development work was still ongoing, with no capital funding commitment for any intervention, either individually or the full package, nor any revenue funding commitment for additional services. Possible future timetables were therefore also still very much under development by Network Rail in collaboration with ScotRail. Assuming all the above interventions were to be implemented, a possible timetable for an additional 8 trains per day passing Evanton has been developed.

Figure 7 below shows how Evanton stops could potentially be included within this timetable. As above, only scheduled passenger trains are shown.

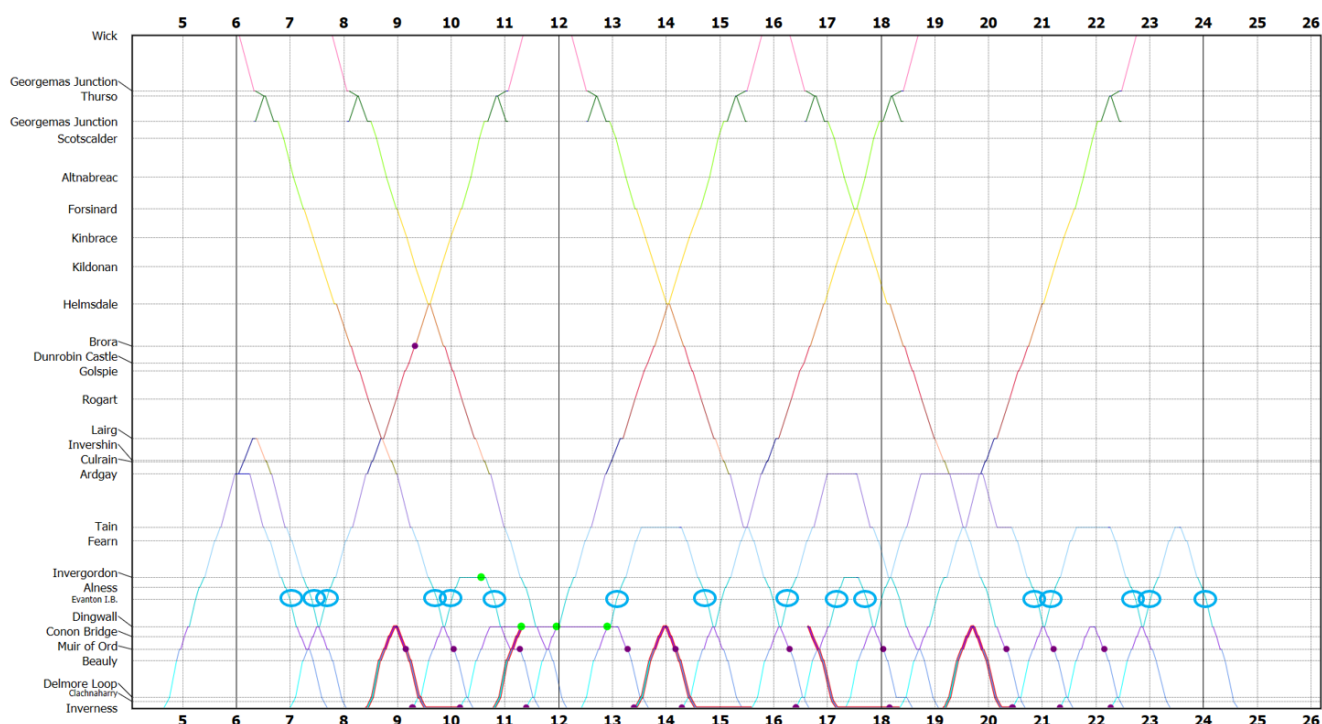


Figure 7 – Train graph showing a possible scheduled ScotRail passenger service with interventions, with possible added stops at Evanton circled in blue

Potentially the services circled in blue could accommodate a station call at Evanton. In summary, this includes 16 services per day with two in the morning peak (services that run towards Inverness, arriving at Inverness between 07:00 and 09:59) and one in the evening peak (services that run towards Dingwall, departing Inverness between 16:00 and 18:59).

The majority of these 16 services would require some form of re-timing to accommodate the Evanton station call. This is largely contained to simply departing earlier from Inverness, arriving later at Inverness or a slight compression of the turnround at locations such as Invergordon, Ardgay or Tain. However, in some interactions, such as where the affected train crosses multiple services further north, more invasive changes could be required.

Regarding the peak services (two in the Up direction and one in the Down direction), the Evanton calls could be accommodated without incident. In the morning peak, this would require a slightly earlier departure from Ardgay and Lairg. In the evening peak this would require the service arriving at Invergordon slightly later (approximately 1.5 minutes later).

It is acknowledged that whilst the total number of services that can potentially accommodate Evanton station calls during the operational day is greater, there are few opportunities to provide calls during the evening peak. The reason for this is that there are more services on the network in the enhanced timetable which interact at the various passing points. Here, attention should be directed specifically towards the c.18:00 departure from Inverness. This service, in the base timetable, can simply depart earlier to accommodate the Evanton call but here, the service interacts with opposing services at Delmore Loop, Muir of Ord, Tain and Ardgay so it is relatively fixed in position without significant intervention.

4.6 Train Crew Risk

Train crewing arrangements constitute a potential risk to stopping services at Evanton noting that potential timetabling changes to some services associated with an additional call could potentially trigger traincrew scheduling constraints as shift lengths are already at or very close to maximum values.

There are three train crew depots in this part of Scotland. These are Wick, who work the Far North line service into Inverness, Kyle of Lochalsh who work the Kyle line services into Inverness, and Inverness, a larger depot who cover both routes, and other work to the east and south. As Wick crews do not work between Dingwall and Kyle of Lochalsh, and Kyle crews do not work between Dingwall and Wick, this simplifies the exercise in understanding train crew risk to these two depots. We are not aware of any differences in Terms & Conditions between Wick and Inverness crews. In general, the train driver terms are the more restrictive, because a driver is

necessary for some activities not involving passengers, such as bringing trains to and from their depots, checking trains before they are ready to enter service, and so on.

It is understood that some work to and from Inverness is covered by Wick crew, in order to ensure that they maintain the 'route knowledge' (the technical expression for the formal capability to work on a train as a driver or guard over a defined section of railway line) to work over the whole route where required, and vice versa with Inverness crews to Wick. A proportion greater than half of services through the Evanton site is covered by Inverness crew. This is because short services at the southern end of the route are generally not worked by Wick crews, and because crews can hand trains over to one another mutually where trains cross at Helmsdale. This type of mutual crew 'relief' (where one driver or conductor take a train over from another) is a less common practice, and not usually permitted, except at defined locations such as this.

Train crews work weeks which are averaged across a reference period to ensure compliance with the hours of their contract, so a very small possible adjustment to crew times arising from a change of stopping pattern such as this, is unlikely to be a problem. However, a more likely issue with crew terms would arise from extending beyond the maximum permitted 'diagram' (shift) duration of 10 hours for train drivers. To give one example of this, it is currently necessary for the 1600 service from Wick to Inverness to omit to call at some stations, including the relatively busy Alness, Conon Bridge and Beauly, in order to return the train driver for the end of their maximum shift length of ten hours. A solution in the form of changing where this southbound service crosses northbound services on the single line may be possible but could require new infrastructure. There is also a relatively tight connection of eight minutes at Inverness with a service to Glasgow Queen Street, the last of the day, which must be preserved. Therefore, it could be challenging to arrange for this service to call at Evanton.

4.7 Summary

Up to 12 new station calls at Evanton could be potentially added into the weekday current timetable, including calls at peak times. The resulting timetable, whilst compliant with Network Rail's Timetable Planning Rules, would, however, have an increased performance risk and could have implications for staff schedules. These issues would both need to be discussed with Network Rail and ScotRail as part of any further studies.

Possible future timetables, enabled by additional infrastructure (not currently committed), could enable more station calls at Evanton by virtue of more trains being in the timetable, however peak services may be more challenging to accommodate.

It would be expected that a similar proportion of calls could be accommodated on Sundays as in weekdays, but further work would be needed to confirm.

5. Conclusions and Next Steps

The engineering review found that the proposed Evanton station site appears suitable for a 15m long platform and the permanent works would be contained entirely within the railway boundary, although temporary land access would be required and there is potential for acquisition of the nearby layby for parking. Power connectivity for provision of lighting and/or SISS should also be considered.

The operational review found that up to 12 new station calls at Evanton could be added into the weekday current timetable, including calls at peak times. Although compliant with Network Rail's Timetable Planning Rules, this would increase performance risk, with potential implications for staff schedules.

Overall, this study has found that reopening the station at Evanton is likely to be technically and operationally feasible. The next stage in the planning process will be STAG appraisal, beginning with an Initial Appraisal: Case for Change study to identify problems, opportunities and objectives for the site. There have been two previous unsuccessful funding applications through the Local Rail Development Fund for a Case for Change report, and it is intended that this feasibility study will assist future decision-making processes and support future application for STAG funding.

