

Report to Partnership Meeting 13 September 2019

RESEARCH AND STRATEGY DELIVERY

Inverness Rail East

Purpose of Report

To inform members of the progress of the Inverness Rail East Study.

IRE Study Background

In February 2019, AECOM was commissioned by HITRANS to undertake an initial feasibility study for a new station in the East Inverness area, following on from Highland Council's Inverness East Development Brief which noted that with two rail lines passing through the area, the potential has been identified for rail to serve the travel needs of the area, and possibly the wider region, via a new local connection to the rail network (i.e. a new station serving this area of East Inverness).

Rail lines connecting to Aberdeen and Perth pass through the Brief area and offer an opportunity for a new, local rail halt to serve residents wishing to travel to the city centre and beyond but also commuters, shoppers and other visitors wishing to visit destinations within the Brief area. Over the next 10 years, both the Perth and Aberdeen lines are scheduled for major investment in line capacity and timetabling of services and therefore this an opportune time for a local connection to the rail network.

However, there are financial, physical and technical challenges to establishing a new rail halt within the Brief area. The Highland Council is working with The Highlands and Islands Regional Transport Partnership (HITRANS) to further investigate the feasibility of a rail halt at Seafield, the Campus or Stratton. This feasibility will assess: market demand for the facility; technical issues such as signalling, line curvature and gradient; the likely degree of support from funding agencies and rail operators, and; an indicative cost for the facility. This work will require to be informed by a wider appraisal based on the Scottish Transport Appraisal Guidance.

East Inverness has developed rapidly over recent years, not only through the continued expansion of the communities around Cradlehall, Smithton, Westhill and Culloden, but also due to the development of key journey attractors such as the Inverness College UHI site and the Inverness Shopping Park becoming established alongside long standing attractors such as Raigmore Hospital. The trunk roads (the A9 and A96) have traditionally acted as a barrier between this area and the centre of Inverness, which focusses movements on a number of critical junctions and crossing points. The current alternatives to car use are bus services operated by Stagecoach North Scotland on the following pattern:

- The UHI Campus is served by a 10 minute headway, comprising Services 2, 3 and 4, whilst the A96 corridor is served by 8 buses per hour, 6 stopping at the Retail Park (Services 5 and 10, with the 11 not stopping there).

Bus services are expected to be reviewed when the new link road opens between Inverness Retail Park and Inverness Campus.

Three potential sites for a new rail station at Seafield, Stratton Farm, and Beechwood UHI have been identified for assessment, each providing a different overall 'offer' depending on which line they are located on and how close they are to the respective developments. Seafield and Stratton Farm are located on the Aberdeen Inverness Line with the Beechwood UHI site located on the Highland Mainline to Perth near Inverness College UHI.

Draft Findings

1. In February 2019, AECOM were commissioned by HITRANS to undertake an initial study into the feasibility of three proposed new station sites from a technical, operational and commercial perspective, with a view to establishing a new station at one of the sites under consideration at Seafield, Stratton Farm and Beechwood UHI.
2. Before presenting the results from the assessment, it should be stated that the works undertaken at this early stage of the study have focussed on understanding the potential for introducing new stations from a technical, operational feasibility and demand perspective. As the study proceeds, future work will require to be undertaken in line with STAG and respective guidance on the development of new stations to understand the potential business case for any new sites that emerge from this review.
3. The technical feasibility review has identified that all sites, from an engineering feasibility point of view, appear to be technically feasible.
4. The single issue of non-compliant track gradients would need to be considered by the rail industry, with the vertical alignment at the Beechwood UHI site on a particularly steep gradient of 1:60. The lesser gradients at Stratton Farm and Seafield make these options preferable from a compliance point of view.
5. Stratton Farm appears to have slightly more clearance to the Up side boundary fence and also lies closer to 2 existing potential platform access routes than Seafield and would therefore appear to be the more technically feasible of the sites on the Aberdeen to Inverness line.
6. In addition, due to the requirement for two platforms at the Beechwood UHI site, the initial construction cost is likely to be double that of the sites on the Aberdeen to Inverness line which is single track and therefore only requires a single platform to be built.
7. An operational assessment to understand the impact of an additional station call on journey times and whether this is likely to cause any conflicts has identified that there are a number of non-trivial and potentially significant issues at both sites.
8. Overall, the Beechwood site is more constrained in terms of both services and situation; here it may be difficult to deliver a sufficiently high frequency service to satisfy potential users, and adding additional journey time to the route is in conflict with wider stakeholder aspirations for reduced journey times to the Central Belt.
9. Whilst the Stratton/Seafield sites offer greater opportunity to provide a reasonable service in terms of frequency, there are still potential timetable issues relating to the single line sections on the route and turnaround times at Inverness. There is likely to be opportunity to flex existing timings, however, more detailed timetable modelling and consultation would be necessary to confirm any impact relating to this.

10. From a commercial perspective, a demand forecasting exercise has been undertaken to understand potential patronage at each of the proposed station sites. Forecasts suggest that Beechwood UHI site provides the best catchment for key facilities and businesses within the Inverness East Area and overall would have the largest forecast station demand of circa 110,000 passenger entries and exits per annum in 2025.
11. The Stratton Farm site is in the best location to serve the local population, particularly the new housing development in the Stratton area, with circa 30,000 passenger entries and exits forecast for trips to Inverness and circa 70,000 passenger entries and exits in total by 2025.
12. The Seafield site has the potential to attract more passengers to the station than Stratton Farm due to its closer proximity to the retail park and Inverness College UHI, but overall is forecast to have considerably fewer passenger entries and exits (circa 50,000) in 2025.
13. Overall the outcomes of the technical feasibility, infrastructure cost and operational assessment suggest sites on the Aberdeen to Inverness Line are likely to be the most feasible, whereas from a demand perspective the Beechwood site is the clear front runner.
14. If any of these sites is to be progressed a decision will have to be made through consultation with the rail industry as to whether the technical and operational constraints at the Beechwood site can be overcome and if not whether the lower demand and relative lower cost for the sites on the Aberdeen to Inverness line are sufficiently attractive for the scheme promoter to further develop the scheme.

Next Steps

Once the report is finalized, HITRANS will be seeking further industry comment and guidance on the issues noted above.

RISK REGISTER

RTS Delivery

Impact – RTS compliant

Policy

Impact – Mode shift, connectivity, environmental benefits, accessibility

Financial

Impact – This stage is fully funded

Equality

Impact – Nil

Recommendations

1. Members and Advisors are asked to note the report.

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Date: 3rd September 2019