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Report to Partnership Meeting 5 February 2021

RESEARCH AND STRATEGY DELIVERY

Fort William Opportunities Around Rail

Background

Fort William suffers from well-known congestion problems, with journey low reliability on the road networks across the town especially during April-September. The increase in tourist traffic impacts on HGV movements at major industrial sites including the smelter, sawmill, and fish processor. This is exacerbated when accidents occur leading to very lengthy diversions. The congestion is not only in the peaks but can also be impacted by tourist staying in the town overnight leaving their accommodation to journey out to visitor attractions. Uniquely rail can provide alleviation for some of these problems.

Rail in Lochaber

Fort William is served by 3 ScotRail trains per day to/from Glasgow plus the Caledonian Sleeper. Mallaig has 4 ScotRail trains per day, one of which starts/ terminates in Fort William. The other three run through to Glasgow. Local use is low compared to tourist use, and peak journey opportunities are limited by the need to service the long-distance market.

The Jacobite steam train operated by West Coast Railways is a key attraction for the area and in 2021 is planned to run twice daily, 7 days per week from April to October, Covid permitting, providing over 500 seats per day.

Freight is limited to bulk alumina inbound for the smelter twice weekly, although this may change with a switch to sea traffic into Corpach. There are aspirations to deliver timber by rail to Corpach sawmill.

RETB signalling means the network is potentially available 24 hours per day, although Fort William itself is controlled by a traditional manned signal box.

The West Highland Line Review Group, currently paused, has begun to consider options for increasing train services, using Oban as an example of how rail can be developed. The 153 cycle carriages were expected to be in service in 2021 but driver training is currently suspended.

What could rail do?

- Provide school travel to Lochaber High from Tulloch in, available for commuters also.

- Provide school travel into Mallaig High.
- Develop park and ride on the A82 north of the town also Spean Bridge.
- Service Nevis range?
- Encourage trips to Glenfinnan (though many just want to see a train on the viaduct rather than travel over it).
- Create a new station at Ben Nevis distillery for the High School.
- Provide increased freight through an intermodal terminal at Corpach or Tomnafaie, timber handling at Corpach and aluminium ingots and associated products at the smelter.
- Satisfy the demand for parcels and online deliveries.

HITRANS role

A number of these opportunities were aired when Maureen Macmillan MSP began local meetings around the time of the second franchise discussions (which led to Invernet) in 2003. Oban followed with business case work in 2008, culminating in the 2014 doubling of frequency. With the pausing of the WHLRG, HITRANS believes it is time to seek consultancy support to understand the potential for development.

Next Steps

HITRANS will appoint a specialist consultant to identify on timetable options based on an additional unit being allocated to Fort William, with an indication of traincrew resources required.

RISK REGISTER

RTS Delivery

Impact – Integration, tourism benefits.

Policy

Impact –Efficiency of transport operations, decongestion, mode shift, emissions reduction, post pandemic planning.

Financial

Impact – Will require partnership funding of £10000 - within the existing rail budget.

Equality

Impact – Access to network.

Recommendation

1. Members and are asked to approve the report.

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Date: 26 January 2021