

Item:

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## Report to Partnership Meeting 24 April 2026

### RESEARCH AND STRATEGY DELIVERY

#### Rail Roundup

##### Purpose of Report

To update members on rail issues across the Highlands and Islands.

##### Route and Branch

Consultants Systra continue to work on the HITRANS Rail Development Strategy. A draft report is anticipated early summer. Sister RTPs Nestrans, SPT and Tactran have been consulted to ensure strategic alignment.

##### Jacobite

West Coast Railways issued the following statement on 13 April 2026:

*Following valuable feedback from our passengers and an evaluation of the operational costs associated with our Mark 2 carriages, West Coast Railways has formally approached the **Office of Rail and Road (ORR)** to reinstate our traditional **Mark 1 rolling stock**. These traditional carriages have been a hallmark of the Jacobite experience for over 25 years, and we know how much our passengers value their classic charm.*

##### Progress on Safety Upgrades

*West Coast Railways is committed to the long-term future of heritage rail and are going to install **Central Door Locking (CDL) systems** across our entire fleet of Mark 1 carriages used on the mainline.*

*While this safety upgrade is a significant undertaking, it will take time to complete. To this end, we are currently working in close partnership with the ORR to finalise a timeline that balances the technical requirements of the installation with our goal of commencing the **2026 Jacobite season**.*

There is growing concern about the impact that the delayed start is having on the West Coast economy, including press reports of visitors cancelling accommodation bookings.

## **Mallaig 125**

On 1 April 2026 the 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary of The Mallaig line was marked with an event at Mallaig organised by the West Highland Community Rail Partnership. A plaque was unveiled by Lady Judith McAlpine, widow of Sir William McAlpine who was the great grandson of the line's original builder, Concrete Bob McAlpine.

## **Rolling Stock Replacement**

On 19 March 2026 ScotRail announced the replacement of the HST Intercity fleet with 22 x 5 car Class 222 diesel trains, to be introduced in 2027-8. They are part of the Voyager family built in 2003-5, with a top speed of 125 mph. The trains will have:

- Full exterior repaint and updated livery.
- Comprehensive interior refresh, including new carpets and full interior repaint.
- A new passenger information system, including multimedia displays.
- New Wi-Fi with Low Earth Orbit Satellite connectivity and voice-over-internet phone capability.
- Family friendly area, providing space for passengers with an unfolded pushchair.
- Wheelchair facilities in both First Class and two spaces in Standard Class.
- Storage for six bikes.
- New electronic seat reservation system.
- New CCTV system – enhancing the safety and security of customers and staff.
- Intelligent Engine Start Stop (automatically stops an engine to reduce emissions).
- New First and Standard Class seats and tables, with plug sockets, USB-A and USB-C at every seat.
- Onboard catering facilities to support at seat and trolley service.
- Reconfigured carriage layout to maximise window alignment and luggage storage.

Room for Growth 2006 proposed these trains and studied the potential Inverness-Edinburgh journey times. The current HST fleet numbers 25, so it suggests that the quantum of services each day will remain the same.

## **Station Access**

Helmsdale, Ardgay and Lairg have been the subject of studies by Network Rail to improve access for mobility impaired passengers unable to use the traditional footbridges.

### **Rail Freight- W Fraser, Power to Rail**

West Fraser at Dalcross is soon to see its first freight train, using the connection installed as part of the works at Inverness Airport Station.

### **Line Closure**

For the second year running, The Far North line is closed between Dingwall and Wick From 2-29 June 2026 for engineering works. This means that 6% of the trains this year will not run which means that along with poor performance and reliability one tenth of trains will be cancelled this year.

### RTS Delivery

Impact – Mode shift, integration, economy, Net Zero, transport investment

### Policy

Impact – Decarbonisation, transport efficiency,

### Financial

Impact – Nil

### **Recommendation**

1. Members are asked to note the report.

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**Date:** 14 April 2026

