

DORNOCH RAIL LINK ACTION GROUP

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Dear Sir/Madam,

07-04-08

National Planning Framework Consultation 2008 for Scotland – response from the Dornoch Rail Link Action Group.

We welcome the opportunity to comment and contribute to the National Planning Framework for Scotland, in accordance with the Planning Act (2006). Our responses are pertinent to the suggested infrastructural improvements as detailed in the Infrastructure Section of the National Planning Framework for Scotland 2: Discussion Draft, and also the Assessment of Strategic Alternatives, related to connectivity and transport infrastructure.

We particularly welcome the strong references to the Scapa Flow marine container handling hub, and the recognition of the Inverness - Caithness corridor as a strategic transport corridor as shown on Map 15 on the Infrastructure Section. We also welcome greatly the recognition of the necessity of improvement of rail links from Inverness to the Far North, as shown on the 6th paragraph of Strategic Alternative 4: Connectivity, particularly with regard to development of strategic rail transport links to ports in Caithness benefiting from the Scapa Flow development.

To this end, we respectfully request that serious and urgent consideration is given to major strategic upgrades to the Inverness – Wick and Inverness – Perth railway lines to capitalise on this development and others. More particularly, we request that the following specific upgrades are listed in the Infrastructure section of the NPF for implementation:

- Double-tracking of the Inverness – Perth railway line;
- Reinstatement of the Clachnaharry – Clunes double tracking on the Inverness – Thurso/ Wick line;
- Construction of the Georgemas Chord, and other engineering line speed improvements on the Inverness – Thurso/ Wick line;
- Construction of the Dornoch Firth Rail Crossing for the Inverness – Thurso/ Wick rail line.

This last improvement is of particular importance as this development would enable the reduction of journey times from Inverness to Thurso/ Wick by 45 minutes, enabling considerable improvements in accessibility, peripherality reduction and freight transference from road to rail, in accordance with recognised statutory planning objectives as shown in technical and STAG 1 studies the Dornoch Rail Link Action Group has conducted. While we recognise and support all improvements to the existing line, it should in turn be recognised that substantial improvements of this nature are needed to enable the Line to develop the Caithness and Sutherland economy post – Dounreay and take full advantage of the Scapa Flow development.

Opportunities from timber harvesting, tourism (for Dornoch as well as Caithness), commuter opportunities for the eastern Sutherland towns, Pentland Firth renewable energy and other schemes would be more easily realised as well through the above upgrades, from an environmental as well as economic viewpoint.

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The principal particular reasons for the necessity of this rail upgrade, with particular emphasis on the Dornoch Rail Link scheme are given in more detail as follows:

- Necessity to improve accessibility and reduce peripherality of Caithness in relation to the rest of Scotland, thereby increasing attractiveness of Caithness for local business generation and inward investment to fully develop opportunities and counteract the challenges posed by the Dounreay rundown. Efficient public transport networks are seen by the Highlands and Islands Enterprise Board as key to opening up the economy and achieving the creation of 20,000 new jobs over the next 20 years, along with a rise in real incomes of between 10% and 15%;
- Necessity to improve passenger and freight transport networks, arising from remoteness of Caithness and Sutherland from main centres of freight distribution. The line to Caithness is a designated Trans-European Network, which confirms its significance as part of a strategic rail artery. This is of particular relevance to the Scapa Flow project, and associated port developments for Scrabster and Wick in Caithness;
- Necessity also to improve the rail links to Caithness to facilitate the safest and most environmentally acceptable means of decommissioning and remediating the Dounreay nuclear site at the best value for money for the taxpayer;
- Uncompetitive nature of the Far North Line compared to the A9 road, hindering attainment of recognised objectives concerning transference of freight from road to rail. Shortening journey times by rail is proved to have a significant benefit in increasing attractiveness of rail freight usage on the Line. The slowness of the line is also the major factor hindering increased passenger usage, and associated accessibility improvements therewith as outlined above;
- Improvement of quality public transport links to Dornoch. A world famous golf course is present at this town, and the proximity of a station afforded by the new rail link would generate substantial opportunities for local business, tourism and national/ international golfing championships;
- Implementation of the Dornoch rail Link would also enable rail accessibility, with reasonable times, for Caithness and Sutherland residents to Inverness before 9 am. This would be a major benefit for the economy of the Far North, and provide a viable alternative to road based transport not currently realisable with the existing Far North line route for these areas;
- The Dornoch Rail Link has been shown, against competing road based alternatives, to have “the greatest merit on the initial STAG 1 appraisal in meeting the widest range of the Government’s objectives. It should go forward to be appraised at STAG 2 level against the bus options.” as shown in the recently completed STAG 1 appraisal. The requirement for proceeding with a STAG 2 appraisal for public transport between Caithness and Inverness, including the Link is supported by the recently completed Caithness Transport Infrastructure Study, completed for the Caithness Partnership.

To summarise, it is critically important that specific mention is made of the importance of strategic rail upgrades, as detailed above, in the National Planning Framework for Scotland. These upgrades will be of critical importance in developing a prosperous, stable and dynamic economy for Scotland and the Highlands, and also to fully exploit the marine renewable energy, oil/gas, timber transport, natural harbour and port development opportunities afforded by Caithness and the Orkneys region.

Please feel free to contact me on the heading details if you require any further information or clarification.

Yours faithfully,


Mark W. Norton, Convener, Dornoch Rail Link Action Group.