

OUR RESPONSE TO THE ITT compiled by Society Strategy Officer Dr John McCormick

The Friends of the West Highland Lines (FWHL) welcome Transport Scotland's ITT. Many of the requirements in the ITT are in line with FWHL's aspirations, and give an excellent opportunity for bidders to develop West Highland Line (WHL) services to serve local communities and boost the tourist industry.

Particularly to be commended are the "Scenic Train" initiatives required by Scottish Ministers. The following submission outlines our Society's proposals for how bidders could deliver these initiatives on the West Highland Lines to Oban, Fort William and Mallaig, together with other desirable improvements Including :

- Upgrade in comfort on all WHL service trains
- Improved timetable giving more convenient departure times for local residents and tourists
- A major vegetation clearance programme to improve views, track conditions and safety.

****Trains***

The scenic trains initiative in the ITT is particularly relevant to the WHL. The current WHL Class 156 trains have high service reliability, but do *not* provide the standard of accommodation required by local passengers or tourists, and now expected by the ITT. Shortcomings include:

- Generally showing their age, with a high level of noise and vibration
- Seats not all aligned with windows
- Airline-style seats are cramped, particularly considering the length of journeys on the WHL
- Windows, doors and gangways between coaches are very draughty, especially in winter
- Heating is also often a problem, and has variations in effectiveness across the fleet
- Provision of toilets is inadequate, with only *one* toilet per two-car unit with 138 seats
- Non-retention toilets flushing onto the track (and now rendered inoperative during station stops)
- Luggage and cycle space is better than on other ScotRail trains, but could still be improved
- No wifi and limited catering.

In delivering the improvements required in the ITT, *essential* features are:

- Sealed windows with effective air conditioning to withstand Highland winters and summers
- Reliable internal doors to eliminate draughts
- One toilet per coach, including one fully accessible toilet per unit
- Each coach to have 12 bays of seats at tables aligned with windows, and up to 12 aircraft-type seats
- Selective door opening to minimise the confusion caused currently at stations with short platforms
- Provision for luggage and cycles, balanced with the need to provide sufficient seating

- Good passenger information with GPS-activated multi-lingual tourist commentaries by earphone
- Wifi and power sockets

This would reduce the seating per coach to between 56 and 60. Given the ITT objective is to increase traffic, many WHL services would need to be lengthened to accommodate this growth. There are four options:

1) Replace the current Class 156 trains with new trains: Train leasing companies are focusing on new electric train fleets, replacing diesel trains which in many cases are not life-expired and can be redeployed. So new diesel trains may not be easy to lease, but would nevertheless be the best solution.

2) Cascade diesel trains to the WHL from elsewhere: Electrification in Scotland will displace Class 170 Turbostars which are newer and more comfortable than the WHL Class 156 trains. Class 158 trains could also become available. Turbostars may be subject to speed restrictions on the WHL due to higher axleload, and both Turbostars and Class 158 trains would have to be cleared for use on the WHL.

Train redeployment would not be acceptable if it increases the already lengthy WHL journey times.

Network Rail need to confirm satisfactory WHL performance before any cascade plan is acceptable.

3) Rebuild Class 156 trains: The ScotRail Class 156 fleet has been refreshed with new carpets and seat covers. A much more thorough upgrade is needed if these trains are to provide the quality of service specified in the ITT. An upgrade, on a greater scale than the pilot Class 317 and 321 rebuilds, should provide all the features listed above, including new seats, air conditioning, and additional toilets.

4) Operate dedicated scenic trains: The Fort William-Mallaig *Jacobite* steam trains, now running twice daily in peak summer months, show how a well-marketed special train using heritage coaches has become an international attraction benefiting the tourist industry in Fort William and Mallaig. *The Jacobite* viability is helped by premium fares, volunteer labour and use of depreciated rolling stock.

Operation of dedicated scenic trains as part of the ScotRail franchise is an option in the ITT.

However, given the low frequency of only 3 trains per day between Glasgow and Fort William, the standard of accommodation on all trains should be improved. Service train frequency should be increased, with some trains including coaches with a higher quality of service. Premium service could be provided on trains timed to appeal to the tourist market. Seats in the coaches offering premium service could be fully reserveable, with at-seat service of local or Scottish produce as recommended in the ITT.

This does not preclude the option of a dedicated scenic train in summer. This could offer a programme of connecting tours by coach and ferry to such tourist magnets as Skye, Loch Ness, Mull, Appin, Nevis Range, Glenfinnan and Glencoe. This would be a showcase for rail tourism, and would also help local economies by boosting visitors to tourist attractions.

***Timetables**

The current WHL timetable has been described as resource-led rather than demand-led. Trains are scheduled to maximise rolling-stock utilisation. The timetable is designed so that trains can also be used to provide commuter journeys on the Glasgow-Stirling line in the morning and evening peaks. This leads to long gaps between services, for example between the 12.21 and 18.21 Glasgow-Mallaig departures.

The EGIP electric timetable is likely to rule out operating WHL coaching stock on the Glasgow-Stirling line, particularly if 75 mph Class 156 trains are retained. Dedicating the fleet of trains to the WHL would have the advantage that train departure times can be optimised to suit West Highland residents and tourists.

The Oban timetable to be introduced in 2014 will be a major step forward. To fully capitalise on the potential of the West Highland Lines, the Glasgow – Fort William – Mallaig timetable also needs to be reviewed and enhanced, building on the changes on the Oban line.

The main objectives of a timetable review should be:

- 1) Reduce the lengthy gaps between services. A six hour gap in the timetable is unlikely to motivate people to forego the convenience of road travel.
- 2) Cut journey times where practical. The West Highland Lines were not built for speed, but journeys are prolonged by radio signaling procedures at stations, and the lengthy stop at Crianlarich for joining/splitting trains. Future upgrades to signaling technology should aim to facilitate faster radio transmission, and the possibility of running non-stop (albeit slowly) through conditional station stops where no passengers are joining or alighting. The timetable review could also lead to more trains at peak travel times running as separate portions to/from Oban and Fort William, cutting up to 10 minutes off journey times.
- 3) Provide departures at convenient times: The current WHL timetable has evolved to deliver multiple objectives including connecting with ferries at Oban and Mallaig, connecting with the Caledonian Sleeper, catering for the travel requirements of residents and tourists, and using the rolling stock for Glasgow commuter journeys. This inevitably means compromise.

The main shortcoming is the lack of services timed to attract the optional traveller. The current morning departure times from Glasgow to Oban and Fort William (08.21), and from Fort William to Mallaig (08.30) are too early to attract the increase in day trippers and tourists envisaged in the ITT.

The 10.37 Glasgow-Oban to be introduced in summer 2014 is a major step in the right direction. Equivalent improvements are needed on the Glasgow-Fort William-Mallaig line. For economic reasons, there may be a need to retain the usage of some WHL stock to provide peak hour services into Glasgow where this can be done without prejudicing the WHL timetable. One possibility might be the peak hour service from Fife, routed via Cumbernauld to avoid the busy Edinburgh-Glasgow line.

****Service Quality and Market Growth***

The potential for growth of leisure travel by train is considerable. There are many international examples of rail journeys being developed into major international tourist attractions, including

the Glacier Express and Goldenpass Express in Switzerland, Rocky Mountaineer in Canada, Vistadome to Machu Picchu in Peru, etc. Quality service and good marketing are key to stimulating growth in ridership. The West Highland Lines are world class scenic routes, with largely untapped marketing potential and considerable scope for enhancing quality of service.

****On-board Service***

The ITT identifies distinctive Scottish produce as a selling point for tourists. On-board service needs to be more consistent. Trolley operation seems to be left too much to the initiative of the individual attendant, with wide variations in the number of times the trolley passes through the train. On busy trains, the time taken to pass down the train will be longer. But a performance target should be set, and monitored.

All train services should have a free travel guide distributed by on-board staff, with a diagrammatic map and description of the main points of interest. The free postcards developed jointly by FWHL, HITRANS and ScotRail continue to be popular, but are not always distributed by catering staff.

Establishing a local Marketing and Service Manager, based in Fort William or Oban, could bring a greater focus to these issues, as well as improving liaison with the local community and transport operators. This role could also include handling contingency plans for out-of-course disruption to connections and tours.

****Stations***

The WHL stations at Oban and Mallaig offer poor facilities for passengers. At Oban, passengers normally have to wait in the open air (often in the rain) outside the security gate until a few minutes before train departures. There are no toilet facilities or shelter. The route from the station to the CalMac ferry terminal building (which offers vastly superior accommodation) is not well delineated.

Fort William station provides shelter, toilets and showers but the concourse is cramped. Mallaig provides nothing other than a part-time ticket office and toilet. Improvements are needed.

At all stations, access and facilities for the disabled need to be improved. This also applies to the many stations where crossing the track using barrow crossing is involved.

****Published Timetables and Information Displays***

Seasonal variations in WHL services make annual published timetables over-complicated and confusing. We recommend that separate summer and winter timetables should be published. The period of validity of the summer and winter timetables should be agreed with CalMac and Northlink to simplify rail/ferry connections (for example, the summer CalMac timetable starts on 3rd April 2014, but the additional seasonal trains on the WHL start on 29th March 2014).

In addition to pocket timetables for everyday use, a larger, attractive, illustrated leaflet advertising the WHL, and giving train information, should be produced for widespread distribution (see below).

The overnight train should also be advertised at all WHL stations and included in the ScotRail timetables.

****Publicity***

The ITT requires the franchisee to apply the ScotRail brand to publicity. Within this, it is important that a distinctive West Highland Lines identity can be developed to market this invaluable tourist

asset.

The ScotRail website should be redesigned to give more prominence to marketing scenic trains. Multilingual options (in major languages spoken by tourists) should be available to encourage visitors from overseas. Publicity material, including attractive timetable leaflets, should be distributed to local tourist offices, hotels, B&Bs, caravan and camping sites.

ScotRail stations throughout the country are excellent marketing opportunities and should carry prominent advertisements to entice commuters to make optional journeys on Scotland's scenic lines. Posters should also be displayed in Edinburgh Waverley, Glasgow Central, and main airports to tempt UK and international visitors arriving in Scotland to use ScotRail scenic trains to explore Scotland.

****Ticketing and Fares Offers***

Special fares offers could stimulate high growth in optional travel. For instance, day trips from Central Scotland, offered at an affordable flat-rate day return from all stations in the SPT area, could have considerable potential to generate new travel. Day returns from Edinburgh to the WHL, backed up by much better publicity, could attract many tourists visiting Edinburgh to take a train trip to the West Highlands. Retention of the Highland Railcard discount is essential to maintain the custom of local residents. It is also important to retain or expand Club 55 to counteract free concessionary bus travel.

The ScotRail website should be optimised to make ticket purchase and seat reservation simpler, and to help sell the attraction of rail travel in the West Highlands. We believe there are underlying deficiencies in online train booking systems which need to be resolved, otherwise potential customers will be lost through confusing information and over-complicated procedures. Our Society is planning a separate submission to cover this issue in greater detail.

****Community Involvement***

Our Society welcomes the Scottish Government's Community Rail strategy. We are working with ACoRP to establish three CRPs corresponding to the three geographically distinct areas served by the WHL: Lomond, Lorn and Lochaber. The CRP strategy should aim to build on the progress already made. Our society has already adopted Helensburgh Upper station. This is being developed as the gateway to the WHL. The Glenfinnan station project has also been assisted by our Society. Our 'West Highland News Plus' A4 colour magazine, published three times a year, is sold in station bookstalls in Oban, Fort William and Helensburgh, and other local outlets including Arrochar, Crianlarich and Tyndrum. Our website www.westhighlandline.org.uk contains superb photographs of the WHL. And a series of colour postcards, funded jointly by FWHL, HITRANS and ScotRail, are distributed free by ScotRail catering staff on WHL trains.

Further local involvement, funded through the CRP strategy, could assist in publicity distribution, and other initiatives aimed at generating additional local patronage, particularly on lightly used services. Rail travel plans for local events would also be useful.

****Vegetation Clearance***

Our Society welcomes the ITT requirement to improve scenic opportunities for passengers. We have

spearheaded efforts to fell trees on particularly scenic stretches of line over several years, with the full assistance of Network Rail and the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park. Recently we

also worked with Highland Council and the local land owner to clear vegetation at the famous Glenfinnan Viaduct.

Lineside tree clearance should have a higher priority in Network Rail's maintenance programmes. Leaf fall affects autumn rail conditions and train performance. Storm damage to lineside trees disrupts rail services and is potentially dangerous. Overhanging branches regularly damage train paintwork.

Control of vegetation is therefore important for avoiding service disruption, as well as for improving the tourist experience of the scenery. Our Society is enthusiastic to assist the franchisee in identifying further schemes.

We suggest the franchisee should evaluate with Network Rail how much of the penalty payments for train delays and cancellations (including the recent cancellations on 5th/6th December 2013 caused by fallen trees), and rail cleaning costs, could be saved over a number of years by a major programme of tree felling.