



CUMBRIA BETTER CONNECTED, FURNESS LINE REPORT

THE RAILWAY CONSULTANCY LTD

HEADLINE POINTS

BACKGROUND:

The Report was commissioned following major concerns from Rail Users, Politicians, Local Authorities, Enterprise Agencies and Industry on the Furness Peninsular and on the West Cumbrian coast that the line was being decrementally downgraded from its original service pattern of a two-hourly through service to Manchester and its Airport interspersed with hourly local services to the main West Coast line at Lancaster.

CHARACTERISTICS

- The line has a relatively low proportion of commuters and a high proportion of discretionary travel: over half the trips recorded related to Visiting Friends & Relatives (VFR), leisure or holiday purposes.
- Even the quietest stations comfortably exceed 10,000 passengers per annum.
- The line is served by two train operators, Northern Rail providing local services and TransPennine Express providing longer distance services to Manchester. Passengers find the more modern TransPennine trains preferable to the ageing Northern Rail rolling stock, most of which is over 25 years old. The disparity of comfort and efficiency between the service provided by TransPennine Express and Northern Rail is considered to be unacceptable.
- Overcrowding is a regular occurrence, particularly with Northern Rail's limited capacity trains, and instances are often recorded of passengers being left on stations to await later services due to trains being so full. In such instances service gaps can be as much as two hours at certain stations.
- The morning peak service now combines commuter and educational traffic on to the same train, causing crowding. Other trains can also be overcrowded during the day due to a growing leisure market. Insufficient rolling stock is having a big impact on passenger comfort and causing overcrowding.
- Cancellations are a frequent occurrence caused mainly by staff shortages and also rolling stock failures.
- There is a concern to ensure that adequate capacity is provided in the future to cater for the current trending rise in traffic levels as well as the planned expansion in the Furness economy, with three thousand additional jobs forecast.

ASPIRATIONS

- Stakeholders' desire to support economic growth for both business and tourism through links to key regional transport interchanges, including Manchester Piccadilly and Manchester Airport. However, there is concern about the reliability and future retention of the rail/air link.
- The Local Enterprise Partnership has recently produced a 10-year plan (Cumbria LEP, 2014) which specifically mentions rail issues as underpinning key economic growth objectives.
- Furness is an important industrial location with manufacturing accounting for 25 per cent of jobs. The investment plans of major companies will increase this proportion. Industrial developments now being planned are of national significance and will create many new well-paid skilled jobs in the area. Major employers include Siemens, GSK, BAE Systems, Sellafield (incl. the new Moorside power stations and Drigg).
- The nuclear reprocessing and associated industries around Sellafield are accessed via the Furness rail line and are a vital factor in considering the line's future.

- Many industrial companies in Furness are global, meaning that senior staff and visiting business partners need good transport links with Manchester Airport as the international airport for the area.
- All stakeholders have emphasised the importance of frequent, high-quality and direct links to Manchester - both to the city-centre as the regional seat of government, science and universities, business services, culture, entertainment, sport and major shopping – and to the airport for overseas business links and holiday flights.
- The tourism strategy for Cumbria is to increase demand from overseas through Manchester Airport and to switch domestic tourists from a heavy reliance on their own cars to use of public and other sustainable transport.
- As a rough guide the total cost of double track electrification of the Furness line is in the region of £140m to £200m at current prices.

FINDINGS:

- The current service is not fit for purpose, failing frequency, capacity and through service requirements. The timetable now operated does not match the needs of existing passengers. The shortfall in service provision is so great that there is an overwhelming case for improvement.
- The first requirement is for a standardisation of the existing service pattern and the second is to fill gaps in the peak service which is preventing many potential travellers from travelling at all. The service needs to be relevant to local people.
- There are constraints on future development including infrastructure, limited line speeds, current inability to operate electric trains, connections with other services (at Barrow, Carnforth and Lancaster), and a shortage of diesel rolling stock.
- A frequent through train service should operate between the Furness line and Manchester Airport, via the city centre and Preston. Access to Manchester and its Airport is vital in terms of feeling connected to the rest of the world, and reducing the perceived isolation of the Furness area. Promoting the area for inward business investment would be severely hampered without a direct service to the Airport.
- The proportion of traffic from the line travelling to destinations beyond Lancaster is significant and it is clear that retention of a robust timetable of through services is essential.
- Significant existing markets are not being addressed, leading to major losses of traffic and social benefit.
- There should be a longer-term aim of providing half-hourly services in the peaks, in both directions.
- The timetable is irregular and at certain times there are long gaps between trains which are considered unacceptable. All stations on the line should have an hourly service even if that slightly increases journey times for passengers travelling longer distances.
- All trains should be air-conditioned, have decent leg-room, luggage space, cycle space, light and airy interiors, seats aligned with windows, high quality Wi-Fi, power points for all seats and tables big enough for modern lap-tops..
- Current capacity problems result mostly from recent minor service reductions which need to be reversed, especially as demand continues to grow. This means that there needs to be a two-hourly service to/from Manchester Airport in addition to a regular local hourly service.
- It is alarming that some stations do not display any train running information whatsoever, leaving passengers uninformed about delays, failures and cancellations.
- Furness Line electrification should certainly be considered for the longer-term (in Control Period 6 (2019-24)). Looking at the period up to 2020 it is clear that the developments already taking place call for a substantial improvement in both the quantity and quality of passenger rail services.

THREATS:

The DfT's franchising proposals for the two current train operators, due to commence in April 2016, currently suggest that the Furness Line be singularly serviced by Northern Rail. This would mean the withdrawal from the line of the modern TransPennine trains to be replaced by the Northern fleet, much of which will reach 35 years of age during the franchise period. This also threatens the future of through trains to Manchester Airport, leaving passengers the prospect of changing at Lancaster on to already crowded trains that will have travelled from Scotland.