

1. Introduction.

This commentary is offered in response to the 'Scotland's Railway after the Pandemic' report from Professor Iain Docherty and the subsequent 'Fit for the Future' timetable consultation from ScotRail.

The principal focus of the above documents is on rail services in Scotland and while we offer detailed comments on these it is important to understand that they cannot be seen in isolation. The railway in Scotland should be part of a comprehensive public transport network, which along with active travel routes forms a sustainable transport system for the future. This will be essential if the Scottish Government is to achieve its decarbonisation and modal shift targets. To quote from the recent Williams Rail Review, the objective should be to "ensure rail is the backbone of a cleaner, greener public transport network". The value of rail services is much greater than the simple cost of provision as they provide connectivity, assist social inclusion, aid regeneration and help to showcase the best of Scotland to the world.

It therefore follows that the future success of the railway will depend on a range of Government policies such as demand management of road transport, land use planning policies, prioritising sustainable modes, and focussing future capital spending on building and improving sustainable transport networks. In the absence of such commitment from government, its own decarbonisation and modal shift targets will not be met.

2. Docherty Report.

The May 2021 report from Professor Iain Docherty is a broad and accurate summary of the challenges and opportunities facing the passenger railway in Scotland in the years ahead. Of particular note is his statement that 'there is no feasible decarbonisation trajectory for transport that does not incorporate substantial increases in the numbers (and probably levels of freight) carried by rail'. He accurately emphasises the 'critical decisions to be made via STPR2' and 'the need to focus on policies to deliver car to public transport modal shift'.

We also fully support his proposals on the rail mix with the need to identify and deliver light rail schemes that will transfer some routes from heavy to light rail and overall create much greater rail capacity in Glasgow and Edinburgh. He goes on to list Aberdeen as a city with potential for light rail. That is indeed the case and it is clear that the current rail network in the city and its surrounding region is woeful when compared to many equivalent-, and indeed smaller-, sized European cities.

Professor Docherty questions efficiency in the rail sector and the need to reduce the operational cost base. Whilst this is certainly the case it must not be at the expense of the passenger experience in terms of reliability, comfort and train capacity. Efficiency gains must also be delivered in infrastructure provision where we would flag up mistakes made in the delivery of the Borders Railway. Here muddled thinking and priorities delivered a railway with new-build single track rail bridges while at the same time significantly expanding road capacity adjacent to the railway. On the railway itself priority should have been given to the length of double track and enhancing Portobello Junction and not gold plating at village stations such as Stow with its forty-plus security cameras.

3. 'Fit for the Future' timetable consultation.

We understand and support the need for restructuring of passenger timetables on the ScotRail network. The current network is the result of a series of enhancements where services have been 'bolted-on' to existing ones. For example when the Airdrie to Bathgate line opened, four additional services per hour were added towards Glasgow but the two existing ones from Airdrie were also retained. Equally the opening of the Borders Railway was not accompanied by sufficient infrastructure to provide a reliable service resulting in its success being tempered by delays and cancellations.

Passengers value reliability as a high priority and simply adding more services to an already stretched network has clearly impacted on reliability. This is evident on the Highland Main Line where a failure to upgrade the infrastructure has resulted in lengthened journey times and frequent delays as more services have been added.

The pandemic has clearly impacted on passenger numbers and the messaging from Governments on working from home and avoiding public transport has had a major impact on railway finances. Fortunately there is now clear evidence of a bounce-back of leisure travel; however, the traditional morning and evening commutes remain subdued and it is currently difficult to predict the nature of future peak periods.

We set out below our view on the different elements to be considered in planning for the future rail network in Scotland and the associated passenger timetables.

Short-term Measures

During the pandemic, timetables were reduced to reflect passenger numbers but retaining those services needed by key workers. As highlighted above, the traditional morning peak remains subdued but there is clear evidence that leisure travel is rapidly returning. In addition, the summer holiday months have shown large numbers of tourists holidaying in Scotland; although the majority came by car, we would wish in future to see many of these tourists being encouraged to tour by public transport. Even so, trains on some routes were uncomfortably full and, in some cases, overcrowded.

Lessons from history tell us that society will recover from this pandemic and that we can be confident that 'normal' life will return. In the short-term we would wish to see ScotRail, Network Rail and Transport Scotland working in harmony to ensure that new travel patterns are swiftly recognised. This will require a flexible and fleet of foot approach to respond to rising demand to ensure sufficient capacity is provided on the right routes at the right times so that existing, returning and new passengers find a pleasant travel experience. In our view, this should be accompanied by a robust marketing campaign to rebuild passenger numbers across the network.

Full Restructuring of Timetables

The medium- to longer-term approach should be focussed on continuing to build passenger numbers to ensure that the rail network plays its full part in a growing public transport system that can accommodate modal shift from the car and is seen as an attractive and reliable alternative.

As already stated, we believe that there is a strong case for a full restructuring of the ScotRail timetables to ensure that they provide reliable and attractive train services for current and future needs. This should ensure that the best and most efficient use is made of current infrastructure but also prepare the railway for the infrastructure upgrades which are required on a number of routes such as the Inter7City routes.

We do not propose to offer detailed comments across the range of timetables listed in the consultation but we are aware that a number of our member organisations have done so. (We are aware of the detailed route-specific response submitted by Scottish Association for Public Transport, and would encourage you to consider their response in detail.) We do however believe that a timetable restructuring should be based on a set of principles for different types of route that are easily understood by existing and future passengers.

We would propose the following minimum frequencies:

- Metro type routes – every 10 minutes
- Key commuter, business and leisure routes (e.g. Edinburgh to Glasgow) – every 15 minutes
- Local services into the cities (e.g. Borders Railway) – every 30 minutes
- Inter7City routes - hourly
- Rural routes – 4 trains per day

The latter proposed specification should be considered an absolute minimum as many of the rural routes have much greater potential as a means of boosting sustainable tourism and better serving their local communities.

Infrastructure Upgrades

A number of infrastructure upgrades are required across the network in addition to the electrification programme. The Highland Main Line stands out as a route where promised upgrades have repeatedly been deferred while the parallel A9 road is receiving multi-billion pound expenditure. It will be important when moving to new regular interval timetables to plan infrastructure upgrades alongside timetable restructuring and the introduction of new trains.

Specific routes

Whilst we do not propose to offer detailed timetable comments we do wish to refer to specific routes which featured in our response to the Rail 2014 franchise consultation:

Inter-City Routes

We highlighted the features of these routes and the type of train required to attract leisure and business travellers to use the train. In our view the refurbished 125 trains provide this accommodation and when lengthened to five coaches with four 2nd class, one 1st class and on-board buffet are highly marketable and will be seen by the travelling public as appropriate inter-city type trains for these routes. It is unfortunate that their introduction was delayed and the pandemic then seriously impacted on the railway. However, until newer trains are introduced and the routes electrified they remain the best way to showcase and market these routes. We cannot support a proposed mix of Class 170 and Class 125 trains on these routes and would question which routes would be deprived of Class 170 trains as a result of this proposal.

Rural Routes

Here we stressed the world-renowned nature of a number of these routes and the intrinsic part they play in the marketing of Scotland to visitors from all parts of the world – in addition to being rural lifelines to many remote communities. We added that “they are currently under-valued, lacking appropriate rolling stock and marketing – and consequently fall well short of their potential”. The addition of some active travel coaches to the Oban line is a small step in the right direction but the promotion and marketing promised by the new franchise has not been delivered and we believe our earlier comments are still appropriate.

Central Belt Electrification

The electrification of many Central Belt routes is very welcome as are the new electric trains provided for these routes. This has demonstrated to the rest of the UK that Scotland can deliver on such projects and this has been widely recognised. We therefore have concerns about the proposed reduction in frequency – especially on the core Edinburgh to Glasgow route.

Rebuilding and Growing Patronage

The lower passenger numbers and consequent impact on railway finances must be seen as the combination of a number of factors coming together in a perfect storm that has hit the railway. Following the award of

the franchise, delays were experienced in the delivery of new trains and the electrification programme and this was further compounded by industrial relations problems. Finally the pandemic and associated negative messaging around public transport use has led to the current situation. What has been missing throughout this period is a concerted and effective marketing campaign to develop and grow patronage. We believe that this should highlight rail's much greater safety and environmental record when compared to the main competitor: the car. The data on average train occupancy serves to highlight the need and opportunity to grow passenger numbers and assist towards Government modal shift targets.

Marketing and Ticketing

The railway in Scotland has much to offer from the connections between and into the cities to the renowned rural routes. We are fortunate that the Beeching era cuts did not impact on Scotland to the same extent as some other parts of the UK – although many routes and stations were closed which with hindsight should have remained open and been developed. Since devolution we have seen a welcome reversal of some of these closures and an investment in infrastructure improvements – especially in the Central Belt.

Given the recent difficulties it seems clear that what is now required is to fully exploit the potential of the railway with a sustained and attractive marketing campaign. A recent report from the Rail Delivery Group (published 4 August) shows that leisure passengers spend an average of £107 per trip on shopping, eating out, hotels and other activities. This serves to highlight just one aspect of the greater value that the railway can deliver to the wider economy. Rail visitors are likely to stay longer and spend more than the transient nature of those visiting by car. The North Coast 500 route has been much publicised and led to a large number of visitors coming to Scotland – many in camper vans causing problems to local communities and carrying their accommodation and foodstuffs with them. A similar campaign to encourage visiting and touring by train would likely generate much greater value. We note that Visit Scotland has recently launched a £6.5 million campaign in an attempt to restore foreign visitor numbers.

A key way to encourage more passengers to use the railway is to offer a range of tickets for touring by rail, weekend stays and city breaks, family and friends groups, off-peak travel and those that combine add-on attractions with the travel ticket. We have recently seen attractive and aggressive marketing on the Anglo-Scottish routes by LNER and Avanti - recognising that they are competing with both air and car passengers. The railway in Scotland offers many benefits and will form a key part of a move towards more sustainable travel patterns in the future. What is now required is a recognition of that reality by all parties and a concerted effort to realise its full potential.

4. Recommendations.

RECOMMENDATION 1: THE SCOTTISH MINISTERS SHOULD PAUSE RAIL SERVICE CUTS FOR 12 MONTHS.

We are not persuaded that the Scottish Ministers' immediate focus should be on failing to restore levels of rail service provision when it should instead be delivering an environmentally-sustainable recovery from Covid. It is remarkable that the Scottish Ministers appear comfortable with proposing not to reinstate one-eighth of ScotRail services a month before it hosts COP26 in Glasgow. The proposals would bring about relatively modest cost savings (£40m p.a.) in the context of Transport Scotland's vast annual budget (£2,500m+ p.a.). In the short-run, cost savings should be found in the Scottish Ministers' multi-billion high-carbon road-building programme rather than in sustainable transport. The Scottish Ministers should refrain from taking steps which could have serious long-term negative repercussions.

RECOMMENDATION 2: THE SCOTTISH MINISTERS SHOULD COMMISSION A MORE THOROUGH, INDEPENDENT REVIEW OF RAIL INDUSTRY COSTS.

We accept that the Scottish railway has suffered substantial increases in its cost base in recent years, and it would indeed be prudent for the Scottish Ministers to review why this has come about. This cost increase will be partially due to increases in service levels specified by the Scottish Ministers over recent years, and we accept that there is merit in reviewing levels of service provision not only to achieve efficiency savings but also to provide better levels of provision on some routes. (Indeed, in our detailed comments, we argue that a full timetable restructure is required, based around minimum frequencies for different types of route and tied to infrastructure upgrades and the introduction of new trains.) The Docherty report is a fair summary of the challenges and opportunities facing the passenger railway in Scotland. However, there needs to be a wider analysis of rail industry costs including, but not limited to, infrastructure delivery costs, workforce costs, and operating procedures. We would recommend that this review should include a full study of the railways cost base compared with European railways, including the benefits of converting some routes to light rail. Having decided to pursue full nationalisation of the Scottish railway, it would seem to us negligent of the Scottish Ministers should they not equip themselves with a fuller understanding of the public finance implications of this decision. The commissioned research should be asked to report within six months in order to inform Ministerial decisions at recommendation 1, above.

RECOMMENDATION 3: THE SCOTTISH MINISTERS SHOULD INSTRUCT TRANSPORT SCOTLAND AND SCOTRAIL TO URGENTLY PUT IN PLACE A RAIL PATRONAGE RECOVERY CAMPAIGN.

The proposed service cuts are being pushed through at a time when ScotRail's patronage has been decimated by Scottish Government messaging that people should avoid using public transport. While this messaging was entirely appropriate in the early months of the pandemic when comparatively little was known about transmission of the virus, this messaging was carried out for too long and too aggressively and it appears to have directly led to longer-run reductions in rail passenger demand. Other train operating companies appear to have been more successful in restoring passenger demand to pre-pandemic levels, and it appears to us that the rail patronage recovery campaigns led by the likes of Avanti West Coast and LNER have been instrumental in helping to restore patronage levels. It is long overdue for ScotRail to do likewise, but this will require instruction from the Scottish Ministers for this to occur. Therefore a concerted effort is required to rebuild and grow rail patronage and this will require a focussed and aggressive marketing campaign delivered immediately. This needs to be accompanied by active management of ScotRail services so that emerging rail travel patterns are met with sufficient capacity on the right routes at the right times.

**RECOMMENDATION 4:
THE SCOTTISH MINISTERS NEED TO PROVIDE THE POLICY FRAMEWORK AND INFRASTRUCTURE INVESTMENT THAT WILL ALLOW THE FUTURE SCOTRAIL TO SUCCEED.**

The future success of the railway and sustainable transport more widely in Scotland depends on a range of Government policies. What is required is a determined focus to prioritise and invest in public transport, active travel, and to implement road traffic demand management measures. Failure to do so will result in the Government's own targets for decarbonisation and modal shift not being met. At the same time, the railway is suffering from decades of under-investment in its basic infrastructure. The Scottish Ministers' priorities for investment over the past decade have been horribly skewed towards high-carbon infrastructure, with £4bn spent on new road capacity and a further £7bn proposed for the next decade. However, the Scottish railway has had to contend with infrastructure north of the Central Belt that is manifestly not fit-for-purpose in delivering rail journey times competitive with the roads. The consultation itself acknowledges that the infrastructure for travel between Edinburgh and Perth is uncompetitive with equivalent road infrastructure. We welcome many of the proposals in Professor Docherty's paper regarding the scope for transferring some Glasgow suburban rail services from heavy rail to light rail (and indeed have been making the case for this for many years ourselves); however, given the timescales typically involved in delivering new infrastructure of this sort, this is unlikely to be a factor in delivering a successful railway in Scotland for a decade or more. We are concerned that the current proposals risk causing irrevocable damage to a functioning suburban rail network before concrete plans are established for its replacement by a comprehensive light rail network.

**RECOMMENDATION 5:
SCOTRAIL SHOULD MAKE INFORMATION ON RAIL SERVICE PROVISION AVAILABLE ON AN ONGOING BASIS, AND CONSULT REGULARLY REGARDING THE NEED FOR REVISIONS.**

In our view, this has been a very useful exercise and we would wish to see it repeated annually. This will allow communities at large to better understand and value their local rail services. That in turn should assist in promoting and growing the rail network in Scotland as a key element of a future sustainable transport system to help Scotland tackle the many challenges posed by climate change, road traffic congestion, inactive lifestyles and poor local air quality.



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sustainable transport**

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