

Friends of the Far North Line

I understand that you have received the following letter from my colleague, Ian Budd, my successor as Convener of Friends of the Far North Line. I thought it right to provide a little more information for you.

Abellio ScotRail and Network Rail in Scotland moved heaven and earth to eliminate, as far as was possible, the nonsense visited upon them by the fact that control of the Scottish timetable is still to be found in Milton Keynes. The Network Rail staff there have been under a ludicrous amount of pressure because of the idiocy of having to process more changes to the GB timetable in May of this year (by a factor of more than five) that has been attempted before. Not unnaturally they have been deeply reluctant to contemplate any further changes in the December timetable. That the railway partners in Scotland have managed to make the last-minute tweaks they have done is a huge tribute to their work - almost wholly unrecognised - on behalf of passengers.

Passengers, who alone experience the day-in, day-out, stress of travelling on services still not reaching the level of reliability they - and the rail industry - wish to see, are often blind to the very real achievements the railway in Scotland is providing. Their patience is wearing thin. Nevertheless there is progress, although the work still has some way to go. Elected Members will be aware that observing a process only partially completed can give a false picture. When the new rolling stock is embedded the increase in reliability will be all that anyone notices: the delays will no longer be important. The lesson, perhaps, is that the delivery arm of the industry - ScotRail and Network Rail - are not masters of the process, and that problems in the supply chain are often to blame. Fixing those problems is not the business of politicians. Where political pressure can, and in my view should, be brought to bear is in the matter of Network Rail.

Network Rail is, in all but name, a nationalized body answerable to the DfT in London. Its Scottish operations, funded by Scottish Ministers, should be answerable to them. The Secretary of State will not contemplate this. It is the view of most sections of the rail industry in Scotland, regardless of party affiliation, that this position is both inefficient and unjustifiable. If Elected Members wish to see a more efficient railway in Scotland they should use their influence to seek to bring control of Network Rail's Scottish operations to Scottish Ministers, and thus to political oversight in Holyrood.



"In October it became clear that eight important train connections would be broken at Inverness in the imminent December 2018 - May 2019 timetable. These would have caused journeys to be extended by several hours, or in some cases an overnight stay to be required - a situation likely to exist for at least six months.

"With some very rapid intervention by ScotRail and co-operation from Network Rail, most of these were fixed at the end of November. However, damage had already been done because up to that point advance ticket purchases would have been impossible where broken connections existed. Even though in some cases passengers might still have been able to make the connections, if the arrival were punctual, the ticket issuing system would not allow the purchase of through tickets with a connection of under five minutes. Apparently there was also an unusual delay in ScotRail being informed about these. The Friends of the Far North Line (FoFNL) also understands that, because of the timetabling catastrophes caused by the DfT earlier this year, Network Rail's timetablers in Milton Keynes have become extremely risk-averse and were initially unwilling to consider any changes before the May 2019 timetable. Had a separate company been running Scotland's rail infrastructure and timetabling none of this would have happened.

"This kind of difficulty is unacceptable. The Scottish timetable should be generated and maintained in Scotland with co-ordination between Scotland and England achieved as it is between all neighbouring countries which operate cross-border services.

"FoFNL believes that because the rail network and passenger services in Scotland are underwritten by the Scottish Government, to whom the operators are answerable, it is paradoxical that Network Rail alone should still be a single GB body, under the control of the DfT which has no other input into Scottish Transport. The daytime Scottish railway system is almost entirely self-contained, only cross-border services being run by English operators. The necessary co-ordination in infrastructure matters between a 'Network Rail Scotland' and a 'Network Rail England & Wales' would be simple to organise, especially as rail standards would be identical.

"In a survey carried out for an independent report commissioned by ScotRail franchise holder, Abellio entitled "Is Scotland On The Right Track?" which was published on 13 August 2018, it was found that "More than six in ten Scots believe that all decisions about the railways in Scotland should be taken by organisations overseen by the Scottish Government, while a further 30 per cent want a combination of UK and Scottish Government oversight. Among the most frequent passengers, 93 per cent want either exclusively Scottish Government oversight (73 per cent) or UK and Scottish Government oversight (21 per cent). Arguably, the results are unsurprising given the natural preference towards devolution in wider public life in Scotland."

"The UK Government is unwilling to consider any change to the current arrangement so FoFNL would like to see cross-party support in Holyrood to put more pressure on the UK Government to change its mind. In the current political situation it is particularly important for non-SNP members to voice their support as this is not a 'political' question."

Yours sincerely

Mike Lunan