

Friends of the Far North Line – Cairdean Na Loine Tuath

Submission to the Scottish Parliament’s Infrastructure and Capital Investment Committee’s hearing on the new ScotRail franchise 2014

Executive Summary

- The Friends of the Far North Line (FoFNL) is calling for a not-for-profit model for the future operation of ScotRail and a strong programme of finance for Network Rail to enable it to progress its enhancement projects.
- FoFNL calls for a new geographically representative body to represent rail passengers throughout Scotland.
- FoFNL calls for some timing trials with more powerful trains on the Highland Main Line (HML) to help determine what kind of rolling stock is most suitable for the future.
- FoFNL wishes to see some faster limited-stop three hour services introduced on the HML before 2014.
- FoFNL calls on the Scottish Government to aim to complete both the HML and Aberdeen – Inverness “strategic priority” schemes by 2017 such that, allowing for any slippage, they will definitely be completed by the end of Control Period 5 (CP5) in 2019.
- FoFNL has submitted to Transport Scotland a professionally compiled blueprint for an hourly service between Inverness and Tain which it hopes might be implemented early in CP5.
- FoFNL calls for the retention of, and improvements to, both the sleepers and the daytime cross-border services to the north of Scotland. The reintroduction of a daytime through train via the West Coast Main Line is requested, as is the reintroduction of Motorail.

Background

1) The new ScotRail franchise from 2014 will enable the Scottish Government, if it so chooses, to make a step change towards implementing various aims of national policy.

2) FoFNL is a 180-member Rail User Group founded in 1994 and is grateful for the invitation to share its thoughts for the new franchise with the Committee. FoFNL is interested in helping to improve both passenger and freight services on the lines from Inverness to Thurso and Wick; from Inverness to Aberdeen; and from Inverness to Perth for onward travel to Edinburgh, Glasgow and destinations south of the border including London. FoFNL’s committee contains a wide range of expertise from retired railway operators, those currently working for the industry, and from commerce, shipping, and the medical, legal, scientific and information professions.

Policy

3) The key national policy aims which may be fostered through the setting up of the new franchise are:

1. Scotland’s much lauded and significant carbon reduction targets through the extension and use of environmentally friendly and sustainable rail services
2. Modal shift from road to rail to save on oil consumption and to reduce road congestion and parking congestion.
3. The chance to save money by reducing the money leaking out of the system. This could be achieved by moving away from the current franchise model towards a not for profit model, a traditional Scottish mutual solution.
4. The desire to have a Scottish railway in which we can have pride that it is “world class” by providing truly appropriate, well-appointed and comfortable rolling stock owned by the Scottish Government and therefore not subject to leasing charges.

5. The Government economic strategy to improve connectivity within Scotland, especially in linking Aberdeen with Inverness and both of those with the other four cities by rail services with notably improved and competitive journey times and a quality of service/comfort equal to the private car.
6. A huge improvement in public transport integration better connecting people, places, work and leisure both within Scotland and to and from the rest of the world.
7. Pre-empting any major future difficulties with world oil supplies or prices by providing significant additional rail capacity and line speed improvements to permit possible sudden massive increases in rail traffic, freight in particular.
8. Providing partnership with rail users such that use is affordable to all comers, and passenger consumer representation is comprehensively restored to at least the levels and wide geographical coverage of ten years ago. Passengers need to feel that they have a say in the design of trains and services.

Structure

4) FoFNL, in common with many other people and organisations, is seriously concerned that the present franchising model is unnecessarily costly and permits leakage of large amounts of public money away from the running of the railways.

5) Does the Scottish Government (whatever the result of the referendum) really want to tie itself in to another five, ten, fifteen, or twenty years of this kind of structure?

6) FoFNL passionately believes that the railways should be run for the economic and social benefit of the country and its people. This leads to the conclusion that some kind of mutual not-for-profit structure should be devised, so that all monies accrued are ploughed back in to improving the railway and its services. Where better to start than now with the completion of the current franchise period and the opportunity to create a new model for the future?

7) It is profoundly disappointing that the Railways Act is drawn up in such a way that state-run railways from any country in the world (with the sole exception of the UK) may bid to run Scotland's railways. **FoFNL believes that this needs to be amended so that a not-for-profit company or companies under the auspices of the Scottish Government might be set up to own both tracks and signalling infrastructure and to run ScotRail passenger train services.**

8) Network Rail is already publicly owned and has a great deal of Scottish autonomy. We understand that the Scottish Government already has powers to procure and own trains, but legislation may be needed to permit the Government to operate rail services.

9) It seems to us that now is the ideal time to implement such an arrangement. If it cannot all be arranged by 2014, a further short-term extension of the current franchise, or temporary operation by a Scottish version of Directly Operated Railways [currently operating East Coast services] should be arranged.

10) This arrangement should save money which

- Is paid to lease trains
- Is paid in track access charges
- Is paid in delay minutes and in administering such a system
- Is factored in for franchisee profits
- Is paid out in shareholder dividends

11) Obviously, as cross-border passenger service franchisees and freight operating companies also use Scottish tracks, some of the cumbersome delay minutes system will remain, but that between Network Rail and ScotRail

can be removed. It should also be possible to cease the practice of NR paying SR for the disruption costs when lines are out of use for repair.

12) There will be initial costs in setting up the new system, but once established it should cost a whole lot less to run. Staff would transfer under TUPE rules. Fewer legal and financial staff should eventually be needed.

Train procurement

13) There would be an initial cost if, and when, trains are bought back from their current owners. This need not happen all at once. It could be phased and, for example, those due to be phased out by 2019 could stay leased until then. There will also be a one-off capital requirement when brand new trains are obtained by the new not-for-profit ScotRail operator.

14) FoFNL presumes that procurement of new electric trains for the Edinburgh Glasgow Improvement Programme (EGIP) services is already in hand. A new diesel (or hybrid) inter-city train for the Edinburgh/Glasgow to Aberdeen/Inverness routes is long overdue and there is also a need for a new long distance rural routes train by 2019.

15) The need for a high-standard Scottish inter-city train has been well known for many years now and is frequently aired in the columns of the Scottish press. The class 170 with its doors opening right in to the carriages, three coach seating limit, and lack of room for luggage, etc., is frequently found wanting. The only other option, other than a new build, might be the current InterCity 125 trains operating with perhaps five coaches between the power cars. These are old trains, but the technical experts in Derby say that they have plenty of life in them yet and many sets will be looking for work and therefore available cheaply later in the decade.

16) A new long distance rural routes train is needed to replace the class 156s which are likely to come out of service in 2019 owing to more stringent disability rules. This affects the West Highland lines and other routes in England and Wales. The Far North and Kyle lines could also be usefully served.

Infrastructure

17) The importance of the work carried out by Network Rail Scotland for the operation of a successful franchise does not receive sufficient attention in the consultation document. It is not sufficiently clear how respondents can comment on the financial decisions which are going to be made to determine NRS's budget for Control Period 5 (CP5).

18) This is particularly important in the light of point 7 in 3) above and nowhere more so than in the almost total dependency of lines in the Highlands on single track sections with infrequent passing loops. That pan-Scotland connectivity of the cities of Aberdeen and particularly Inverness are dependent on such a slow and cumbersome infrastructure and that these lines are at full capacity for much of the day demonstrates the urgent need for redoubling and reinstating loops on these lines.

19) The First Minister's 5th August, 2008 post-Cabinet announcement of a 35 minute cut in journey times between Inverness and Edinburgh was warmly welcomed and is now an expectation of the Highland public. Since then, some services have become slower and there is still much to do in providing the necessary loops, double tracking and more powerful trains to achieve this. **FoFNL earnestly hopes that this will be achieved within CP5 and thus within the first five years of the new ScotRail operation.**

20) Indeed, the timing of your committee meeting provides an illustration of how necessary are these improvements for business links in both directions between Inverness and Edinburgh/Glasgow/Central Belt. The first train from Inverness at 06.47 only reaches Edinburgh at 10.00; therefore an overnight stay is required

in order to attend. In the opposite direction it is even worse with the first arrival being as late as 10.28 by the 07.06 from Glasgow. The Edinburgh connection for this leaves at 06.29, a four hour journey!

21) Four hours and a change of trains is not attractive to either business or leisure users when the journey can be done by car in just under three hours. Even today, the journey could be done by rail in three hours with a more limited number of stops. The main problem is timetabling for trains to pass robustly on the single track lines. **FoFNL would like to see some faster limited stop 3 hour services introduced before 2014.**

22) Hopes for other lines include the Strategic Transport Project Review priority project for completion in 2016 of an hourly frequency between Aberdeen and Inverness with trains taking no more than two hours en route and a new station at Dalcross for Inverness Airport and the Scottish Open Golf Tournament. This package would also see a half-hourly frequency from Elgin to Inverness and from Inverurie to Aberdeen.

23) Services on the Far North Line between Inverness and Wick run via Thurso and have been slowed down by 25 minutes from end to end since 2004. This has made the trains less competitive to road in journey times. Points, signalling and level crossings are outdated and need expenditure to improve matters significantly. Again there is a lack of passing loops in appropriate places. The Invernet local and commuter services at the southern end of the line in Easter Ross have been doing well, with scope for further expansion including the reopening of Conon Bridge station awaiting funding to serve new housing developments. **FoFNL has submitted to Transport Scotland a professionally compiled blueprint for an hourly frequency service between Inverness and Tain which we would hope might be implemented early in CP5.**

Cross-border Services

24) FoFNL strongly supports the retention of the sleeper services in something like their present pattern as part of the ScotRail operation and, even after the full implementation of HS2, the Highland sleeper may still be necessary. In our Rail 2014 response, we have suggested three ways in which the operation of the sleepers could be more economic: splitting and joining the current Highland sleeper portions at Carstairs rather than Edinburgh; push-pull operation whilst electrically powered; and running without guards.

25) FoFNL would like to see the reintroduction of Motorail services between accessible points in Scotland and England. This would be environmentally friendly and help the growing number of mobile elderly drivers who have difficulty getting hire-car insurance once they reach the age of 70. This socially inclusive service could be made part of the ScotRail portfolio.

26) Most passengers (ourselves included), and many people in the rail industry, have been horrified by the suggestion that Anglo-Scottish daytime trains should go no further north than Edinburgh. To have to change at Edinburgh, with all the attendant difficulties and uncertainties, would deter both business and leisure travellers from going by rail. Passengers from York to, say, Tain would have to change twice.

27) We consider the Highland Chieftain service between London Kings Cross and Inverness should continue to operate 7 days per week all year round. We deplore the managed decline in the standard of service by recent operators, particularly of the northbound catering offer even though a chef is present and could provide hot meals. The Highland Chieftain "High Tea" and three-course dinner were legendary. Whether or not this train remains part of another franchise or transfers to ScotRail, a return to the previous standard of service should be specified.

28) FoFNL would like to see the reintroduction of a daytime service to and from northern Scotland via the West Coast to give connectivity with the North-West England and West Midlands conurbations. A route via Mossend rather than via Edinburgh would be most appropriate. Operation might be by ScotRail using InterCity 125 or Voyager/Meridian sets.

Passenger Representation

29) FoFNL is concerned that passengers' ability to have their views heard by the railway industry has been severely curtailed in recent years to the detriment of both the industry and its users. This is amply illustrated by the spate of letters in the Scottish press about the inadequacy of inter-city trains (see 15 above) and other letters about the various cross-border services (see 24 – 28 above).

30) The Rail Passengers' Committee for Scotland, and its regional sisters elsewhere in England and Wales, were disbanded in 2005 and replaced by a new GB organisation named Passenger Focus. The members of the RPCS had been drawn from all parts of Scotland and were a valuable resource to the committee and to the industry.

31) Passenger Focus's man in Scotland, Robert Samson, and its Scottish board member, the late James King, have worked tirelessly to keep on top of the situation. PF has recently been slimmed down even further and in FoFNL's opinion the resources are no longer there to represent users adequately in Scotland. **FoFNL calls for a new geographically representative body to represent rail passengers throughout Scotland.**

Conclusions

32) FoFNL applauds the many major improvements that have taken place in the Central Belt in recent years, and particularly the promotion of a renewed railway link to a part of the Borders.

33) We are concerned that the improved strategic links of Scottish significance better connecting the CB with Inverness and Aberdeen (and the railway between these two cities) are taking far too long to complete. The suggestion in the Scottish Government's recent Infrastructure Investment Plan that the promised completion of the HML and Aberdeen – Inverness line improvements may not be realised in full in 2011 and 2016 respectively but are now programmed back as far as 2025 and 2030 respectively is just not acceptable. 2011 was always unlikely and capital budget pressures are understandably causing some delays, but **FoFNL calls on the Scottish Government to aim to complete both schemes by 2017, such that, allowing for any slippage, they will definitely be completed by the end of CP5 in 2019.**

34) The faster services from Inverness to Edinburgh/Glasgow were predicated on much more powerful trains such as Voyagers, but we are still waiting for a trial run to see what can be achieved. FoFNL is concerned that the proposed IEP train for East Coast will be slower than the current HSTs on the HML gradients. **FoFNL calls for some timing trials with more powerful trains on the Highland Main Line to help determine what kind of rolling stock is most suitable for the future.**

35) The Far North Line is badly in need of much investment to significantly speed up services. Journey times to Wick have increased from 3 hours 45 minutes in 1994 to mostly between 4 hours 10 and 4 hours 25 minutes in 2012. Network Rail knows it has to make improvements here and we trust it will be given resources in CP5 to make a start.

36) With the current financial constraints, it is not the best time in which to be starting new programmes for either Network Rail or ScotRail. The Government's concept of Value for Money is laudable but so are its environmental, social inclusion, integration and other policies. On-going rail development ticks all the right boxes. That is why **Friends of the Far North Line is calling for a not-for-profit model for the future operation of ScotRail and a strong programme of finance for Network Rail to enable it to progress its enhancement programmes.**

ENDS.

FoFNL, February, 2012.