

Scotland's two-tier railway system and why the central belt wouldn't put up with it

If you live in Inverness, it's quicker to fly to London than get a train to Aberdeen

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The main railway station of Scotland's third-largest city is curiously empty at around 11am this midweek morning. Aberdeen Station is the main transport hub for the north-east of Scotland and the gateway for most onward journeys further inland and around the coast. Today, there are 11 people waiting for trains that will bear them to Forres, Nairn, Montrose and Inverurie, or south to Edinburgh and Glasgow.

Throughout the rest of the day until the rush hour, this number doesn't really fluctuate and even then it's not exactly jumping. Certainly, this grand old Victorian station will have been much busier during morning rush hours, but even so...

It opens out into Union Square, perhaps the best –and best designed – shopping mall in Scotland. And if you're looking for something a little less extravagant there's the stalwart delights of the Trinity Centre across the road. This really ought to be a destination station for a decent day out in Aberdeen, still stout and gleaming in its grey granite raiment.

And so I go seeking answers from station users. Marjorie has travelled from Perth to visit an old friend, but used to live in Aberdeen. She's dressed up elegantly in the way that men and women of an older generation still do when embarking on a day out. She tells me the train journey from Perth was enjoyable, quick and comfortable, and then: "But if you live in the towns and villages around Aberdeen it's not that easy to get here."

In the shopping centre at one of the coffee kiosks, Davie is trying to sell me a mid-morning meal deal. "Where is everyone," I ask him. "There's tumbleweed blowing around that station back there." He knows where this is going.

"Look, don't talk to me about connectivity in the north-east," he says. "If you live in Inverness, it's quicker to fly to London than get a train to Aberdeen. If you lived in the central belt you simply wouldn't put up with the scarcity of routes throughout the north-east."

In November 2023, the North East MSP Liam Kerr issued a warning about the consequences of plans to cut local rail services by around 50% following Scotrail's announcement of a new timetable. This seemed to sacrifice local rail links for a stronger intercity service connecting to the central belt. Trains from Aberdeen to Inverurie went from 74 to 63 while services from Montrose, Laurencekirk, Portlethen and Stonehaven were slashed by up to 50%.

If you're living in Scotland's central belt that's like cutting services to and from places like Greenock, Cumbernauld, Motherwell and Paisley. It would be unacceptable. The towns and villages dotted around the north-east of Scotland might be further-flung and less populated, but they're just as crucial to the local economy as the big west of Scotland conurbations are.

Arranging your rail connectivity purely on population density and length of journey means that everyone living north of Stirling would be effectively deemed second-class citizens in terms of train connectivity. It rebukes all those politicians who keep telling us how "vital" the north-east economy is.

"These drastic plans have the potential to kill our region's high streets and could not be more badly timed, particularly for struggling businesses who desperately need a busy Christmas," said Mr Kerr.

His concerns were underpinned last year when it was discovered that a Transport Scotland review in 2008 had promised an hourly Scotrail train service between Inverness, Elgin, and Aberdeen.

The issues around the diminishing rail network in this region have been championed eloquently and effectively by the Campaign for North East Rail, an advocacy group founded four years ago to make the case for reinstating some of the old routes and stations in Aberdeenshire and its surrounding towns and villages.

The three founder members comprise two railway engineers and a train driver, representing a career lifetime of lived experience and expertise about rail services in Scotland's north-east. One of them is Wyndham Williams who points to the widespread support the group is receiving from across politics and the business sector.

They have already received £250,000 from the Just Transition fund to make a feasibility study into their overall proposals and are working on strategies for funding future upgrades and reinstatements. Mr Williams also rejects the perception that funding the reopening of some discontinued routes didn't offer a big enough return for investment. "We hosted a round table discussion recently that included representatives from the Borders who told us that the new rail line down there had easily outperformed what had been expected. Fife too. They told us that they now couldn't contemplate life without the new services.

"The Fraserburgh and Peterhead line was closed in 1979 and it just isn't appropriate that this vital route has never been re-opened. Certainly, there is a higher quotient of car ownership up here owing to the geography, but there are many older people and young people who don't drive.

"A better train service improves access and creates opportunities in education, employment and health. It gives more people options other than driving. Right now in Scotland, whenever you leave the central belt conurbation and live anywhere north of Stirling, your mindset about how you get around Scotland and the UK is drastically shifted."

He also addressed another false assumption rooted in ignorance of society and infrastructure in the north-east. In the central belt there's a common perception when Aberdeenshire is mentioned that it's all golf clubs and white BMWs, and all the other ostentatious baubles of oil wealth and farming.

"Peterhead and Fraserburgh are big, important towns in the north-east," said Mr Williams. "Think Cumbernauld, Paisley, Greenock. But Peterhead and Fraserburgh are among the least affluent communities in Aberdeenshire. It's not all milk and honey. These places and others like them could do with this investment. They are highly productive towns that generate income for the rest of the country."

In the central belt, you never really have to spend much time planning journeys around the west of Scotland, Lanarkshire and Renfrewshire. In the north-east it can come to resemble a military operation requiring precision and attention to detail. If you haven't factored in a generous amount of time to take account of cancellations or signalling problems then a connection is missed. In the west this might delay you for a little while. In Aberdeenshire, the day is gone.

"It takes less than two hours to get from London to York," says Mr Williams, "but it's another five hours to Aberdeen. From Peterhead and Fraserburgh it takes you two hours to Aberdeen and then three more to Glasgow and two-and-a-half to Edinburgh. New York is only six hours away. It's nearly six hours to Scotland's two major cities if you live in the northeast's main towns."

It's another area, of course, where the so-called commitment of Scotland's main political parties to tourism and the green economy disintegrate into soundbites.

On one hand, they want us to reduce the time we spend in cars and to spend more time in places such as the towns and villages around the north-east coast. But very little effort has been expended on mitigating any of the catastrophic Beeching cuts in 1966 which effectively cut off communities in this majestic area of Scotland.

"It's very hard to put this across to people in the central belt. We run a two-tier railway service," he adds. "In Scotland, if you want to go between some of the smaller places that aren't connected to the intercity routes then you've got problems. The rail services have diminished since the 1960s and in Scotland this has disproportionately affected the north-east.

"We believe the main lines should continue all the way along the coast to Peterhead and Fraserburgh, so that Aberdeen becomes a through station and we need this to improve access to employment across these areas. It's why the Chamber of Commerce is one of our main backers. People drive economic growth but that means getting people to live here. Restoring some of these routes and stations is crucial to that."