

Proposed ScotRail timetable for May 2022 – “Fit for the Future”

Submission from Railfuture Scotland

The need to reduce the use of fossil-fuels in transport is by now universally known. Rail has the double advantage of being the most environmentally-friendly way to transport large numbers of people and proven to be attractive to motorists, resulting in a switch from private cars.

Until Covid, rail was also growing in popularity, carrying more passengers than in the 1920s, on a network just a third of the size.

That being so it is difficult to comprehend why Scotrail proposes to make rail travel less attractive by cutting services and significantly lengthening some journey times.

Few will doubt the claim that there will be a change in commuting patterns. However, with many workers still working from home and not yet knowing what their working week will look like once they are back in the office, it is not clear how Scotrail can be anything like certain that their proposals will fit the requirements of potential passengers.

For instance, in his report published in March, Ian Docherty identifies Fife-Glasgow and Edinburgh-Ayrshire as commuter routes which could see an increase in patronage. And yet Scotrail proposes to:

- Withdraw the direct Kirkcaldy-Glasgow service;
- Reduce the frequency of Edinburgh-Glasgow Queen Street express trains outwith peak hours;
- Withdraw the semi-fast Edinburgh-Shotts-Glasgow Central trains outwith peak hours.

With the refusal of Transport Scotland to build just 1.8 miles of track and a station at Glasgow Cross, this last was the nearest there was to Glasgow Crossrail because with a journey between Edinburgh and Central taking around the same time as travelling to Queen Street on the express and transferring to Central, it was attractive to Ayrshire-bound passengers. Yet this cut, plus the halving of the off-peak Edinburgh-Glasgow express, will make the journey considerably longer with 18 or 19 intermediate stops and thus much less attractive for commuters travelling outwith the traditional peak times – and we know working patterns do not always fit conveniently into these – as well as messing up connections for leisure travellers, even although it is admitted that leisure, or ‘discretionary’ rail travel is taking up a greater share of journeys and indeed is likely to increase. One might ask what was the point of electrifying the Shotts line when it will now be used only by very slow trains?

It has been said that increasing the journey times between Edinburgh and Perth by routing the trains via Cowdenbeath is putting the clock back several decades. And when a Scotrail manager publicly admits that, yes, the train journey will take so much longer that one would be better driving between Perth and Edinburgh, one has to ask what is going on? Similarly in Fife, where travel time between Edinburgh and Ladybank and especially Edinburgh and Cupar have been increased by 13-17 minutes, with journeys taking longer than they did in 1985! Leuchars fortunately still has the fast trains from Aberdeen to Edinburgh, though it is not clear that restrictions on the Tay Bridge still require the train originating from Inverness which leaves Dundee at 08:24 is to whizz through Leuchars without stopping, meaning 2 peak time trains an hour apart each taking over an hour and a quarter to reach Edinburgh Waverley.

www.railfuture.org.uk www.railfuturescotland.org.uk www.railfuturewales.org.uk
www.railwatch.org.uk

It is generally accepted that introducing a change of trains during a journey results in a loss of 20% of passengers. We can therefore expect to see a reduction in usage on journeys such as Kirkcaldy-Perth or where the breaking of the Fife Circle necessitates a change at Inverkeithing or Markinch solely because of this inconvenience. It should also be noted that many Fife stations are either wholly unstaffed or only open for a few hours in the mornings. This will present real difficulties with passengers who require assistance to change trains. Hitherto they have been able to travel right round on the one train but woe betide them should they have to change at a station when it is unstaffed.

Elsewhere in the network already sparse services have been made even sparser, such as Carlisle/Carstairs-Edinburgh services being reduced from 5 to 3 daily return journeys. Is this likely to attract passengers back?

It is not at all clear why Abellio is preparing a timetable which it is destined never to operate, because by May 2022 the Scottish Government will already have been running the railway for 6 weeks. That being so, is a programme of reduced services, enforced changes and longer journey times really likely to attract passengers, already wary of public transport because of the repeated pandemic message that it is dangerous, back to the railway? The real fear is that many will be deterred from using the train at all and go back to driving.

Back in the 1960s-1980s, exemplified by the notorious Beeching and Serpell reports, it seemed to be believed that cutting services, sometimes whole lines and thus reducing the opportunities people had to actually use the railway, would make them pay their way. As is well known it didn't work, yet while not (yet?) advocating wholesale closure of stations and lines, the proposed Scotrail timetable again gives passengers fewer chances to use the service. What should have been an opportunity, with improved connections at Motherwell, investment in the likes of Allander and Lanark, re-openings at Clackmannan, Kincardine and Longannet (Talgo), preparations for a station at Newburgh, a sensibly-priced Glasgow Crossrail without vastly-expensive sub-river tunnelling, and progress towards expansion of the network such as extending the Longannet line to Dunfermline, taking the Borders service from Tweedbank to at least Hawick with the intention of eventually reaching Carlisle, even building a new line to St Andrews, constructing the Dornoch bridge and restoring the Dumfries-Stranraer line with an extension to Cairnryan, is in danger of being squandered with a retreat in some cases to the level of service of 40 years ago resulting in potential and current passengers being pushed back into private cars. Nobody gains by that.

Jane Ann Liston – Secretary

2021-10-01