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Anne Martin
Consultation Manager
Rail Directorate
Transport Scotland
Buchanan House
58 Port Dundas Road
Glasgow
G4 0HF

Please ask for Ewan Wallace
Direct Dial: 01224 664580
Email: Ewan.Wallace@aberdeenshire.gov.uk

Infrastructure Services

Transportation Service

Woodhill House

Westburn Road

Aberdeen AB16 5GB

Tel 01467 620981

Fax 01224 662005

www.aberdeenshire.gov.uk

LP-3 Aberdeen 3

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If you have difficulty reading this document please contact Ewan Wallace on 01224 664580

Dear Ms Martin,

Rail 2014 – Consultation Response from Aberdeenshire Council

I refer to your letter to Aberdeenshire Council dated 15 November 2011 in which you invited comment on the consultation on the future of rail passenger services in Scotland.

The Council welcomes the consultation and being given the opportunity to comment.

Following consideration by our Infrastructure Services Committee on 26 January, I have pleasure in setting out Aberdeenshire Council's consultation response. As you will see, we have set out our response according to the main headings within the consultation document.

It should also be noted that Nestrans, as the Regional Transport Partnership for Aberdeen City and Shire, will be submitting a separate, fully comprehensive response to the consultation and the specific questions raised. Aberdeenshire Council have fed into this and are fully supportive of Nestrans feedback.

Yours sincerely,

Councillor Peter Argyle
Chairman, Infrastructure Services Committee

Rail 2014 Consultation – Aberdeenshire Council’s Response

The comments below represent the key issues that Aberdeenshire Council puts forward for consideration as part of the Rail 2014 Consultation. Many of these issues have previously been highlighted to Transport Scotland in discussions relating to the Nestrans Rail Action Plan. Aberdeenshire Council is keen to see these issues fully taken on board and advertised in the next rail franchise.

Procuring rail passenger services

On the whole, this question is considered to be outwith Aberdeenshire Council’s area of expertise. However, it is our view that the implications of separating “economic” from “social” aspects of the franchise would need to be considered very carefully. Based on our experience of running local bus services, we concur that it is appropriate to consider a mix of service types given the wide variety of routes across Scotland and the many purposes that they serve for residents and visitors. Throughout the network it is likely that many services perform both economic and social functions or that lines carry trains performing both functions (express services may be considered economic, with stopping services providing a primarily social function for example). There is a need to ensure an appropriate balance between economic and social railways, recognising the role of providing access to towns and cities and enabling a choice of transport options.

If a decision was taken to separate the franchise into parts, services to, from and within North East Scotland would likely be considered “economic” but it would be essential to retain an element of social support, including a set down minimum service level for each station. For example, services from the Central Belt running across Aberdeen may be economic for the majority of their journey, but possibly “social” through to Inverurie?

Clearly when considering the length of any potential contracts, it is our view that longer contracts, with pre-specified contract break periods would be most appropriate.

Achieving reliability, performance and service quality

The past few years have seen phenomenal growth in numbers using the rail system in North East Scotland. To support future growth and allow rail to become an even more significant part of the overall transport network, Aberdeenshire Council believes the following issues must be considered.

- The issue of cross-border services from London terminating at Edinburgh has been raised in the consultation and one which Aberdeenshire Council is fully opposed to. Ensuring that these services continue to serve North East Scotland direct is vital to local residents and businesses. Our reasons for this are set out in more detail under the heading ‘Cross-border services’, below, but given this is an issue of extreme importance to the North East of Scotland, we feel the need to highlight this up front in our response.
- Overcrowding is an issue on certain services. To address this, and improve service performance and quality more generally for North East Scotland rail

users, Aberdeenshire Council supports the Nestrans Rail Action Plan in its aspirations for:

- Increased opportunities for cross-Aberdeen journeys by running further Central Belt to Inverurie trains but also considering opportunities for through trains from Inverness-Stonehaven as well.
- Improved Sunday frequencies on the Aberdeen-Inverness line and to a lesser extent to/from the south.
- Opportunities to maximise existing infrastructure, for example using timetable gaps to provide additional services in and around Aberdeen. As one example, residents frequently comment on the requirement for additional stops at Portlethen.
- In developing franchises, careful consideration needs to be given to the balance between journey times, reliability and performance. Aberdeenshire Council is keen to see additional stops at North East stations introduced, as well as new stations themselves. However there is a need to ensure that the introduction of additional stopping points does not have an adverse effect on journey times and that an appropriate balance is sought between better stopping patterns to accommodate the demand for rail links to/from smaller towns and faster end-to-end journey times between major destinations.

Scottish train services, fares and stations

Aberdeenshire Council believes that the consultation should consider opportunities for opening new stations, and increasing stopping patterns – such as those raised above – not simply considering closures. In this regard, we believe the rail consultation should give consideration to the following:

- Building on from the successful re-opening of Laurencekirk station, Aberdeenshire Council strongly supports the development of a new station at Kintore, by bringing forward the Aberdeen-Inverness upgrade. Ideally, the new station here should be included in a timetable that allows for around ten trains per day in each direction.
- Consideration should be given to a new station at Newtonhill linked to Local Development Plan proposals but also current stopping patterns (e.g. Laurencekirk, Stonehaven, Portlethen).

In relation to fares and ticketing, Aberdeenshire Council would offer the following:

- Fares policy should be seen as a tool to help manage demand and influence modal choice, to achieve the objectives of the Scottish Government's National Transport Strategy.
- Aberdeenshire Council would like to see the availability of all ticket types from all stations in the North East, providing choice to rail users and ensuring value for money. It is considered that until current restrictions are removed, smaller stations will continue to be at a disadvantage.
- Incentives should be considered to encourage off-peak travel to be competitively priced. The use of promotional pricing to encourage trips at quieter times could help reduce issues of over-crowding on peak time services.
- The current practice of extremely high fares bought on the day of travel does not seem to achieve any stated objectives and instead simply exploits those who have not known their travel itineraries in advance. A principle of very busy trains being more expensive than quiet trains would be acceptable, the key should be differentials based on the train chosen (or the busiest part of the journey in the

case of long distance journeys) rather than when the ticket is purchased. Similarly, it is considered unacceptable to penalise travel from smaller stations relative to larger stations.

- Pricing regimes should be aimed at incentivising longer journeys on express trains rather than filling capacity for short trips. As set out in the Nestrans Rail Action Plan, average journey lengths to and from Aberdeen station are close to 150 km, with over half of all journeys being over 100 kilometres (compared to Glasgow stations which have less than 5% of journeys over 100 km). Rail is therefore still largely a strategic long distance travel choice, and it is important that in encouraging more local choice, fare structures and ticketing initiatives reflect these needs.

In relation to stations, Aberdeenshire Council would offer the following points for consideration:

- A programme of station upgrades across North East Scotland, including ensuring DDA compliance, staffed stations, adequate waiting rooms (such as at Stonehaven), and improved public transport access should be considered.
- The availability of car parking is a key determinant to the number of people using rail and the Council would like to see the Scottish Government support the development of car park extensions at Stonehaven and Inverurie.

Cross-border services

As stated at the outset, Aberdeenshire Council is completely and utterly opposed to any proposals to terminate cross-border services at Edinburgh and believes that maintaining through trains between the North East of Scotland and London is critical for both economic/business and leisure trips. This is evidenced by the fact that cross-border services run at up to 75% load factor north of Haymarket (and peak times will be even busier).

The consultation discussed the need for a franchise that serves the passenger interests first and it is difficult to conceive how taking away a through service, requiring all passengers to change trains at Edinburgh and extend travel time could be considered as being in the passengers' interest. Such a move would inconvenience many travellers, harm economic and tourism potential, create severe capacity issues and limit travel choice to/from North East Scotland.

The same would apply to other long-distance services (Leeds/Plymouth and connectivity to other destinations). These services provide valuable additional capacity to/from the North East of Scotland and without them, the existing problems of overcrowding would be even worse.

Furthermore, at a time when air services are under threat due to airlines using slots for long haul routes (BA's recent purchase of BMI may lead to reduced competition and possible fewer flights between Aberdeen and London) and the UK Government's Aviation Policy review, it is necessary to consider access to London as part of an overall all mode access to London policy.

Finally, the Cities Outlook Report for 2012 identified Aberdeen as one of the five cities best placed to aid the UK's economic recover. From an economic perspective, it is therefore vital that transport infrastructure and high quality services are delivered

for the region to grow and continue to support the country's economic recovery. This includes a continuation of cross-border rail services direct from the North East of Scotland to English cities including London.

Rolling stock

Aberdeenshire Council believes that there is a clear need for additional capacity on peak services and that all train services should have a minimum level of comfort and facilities provided as standard. This should include toilets, access for persons with a disability, and catering.

Passengers - comfort, security, information

Aberdeenshire Council believes that the following issues should be taken on board to help improve the overall passenger experience on Scotland's railways.

- The principle should be that people travelling by train should be able to expect a seat when they travel, particularly on longer journeys and sufficient capacity should be provided to satisfy demand wherever possible. Although some passengers may accept some standing in a suburban service, this is different from longer distance routes.
- There is considerable anecdotal evidence to suggest that many passengers choose East Coast trains over Scotrail services owing to their greater comfort for longer distance journeys. Including aspects of these services on Scotrail service, such as catering carriages over trolleys, has the potential to greatly improve passenger comfort and convenience.
- Regarding the availability of alcohol on trains, or otherwise, it is appropriate that any decision is informed through investigation with the wider public. One suggestion could be the introduction of alcohol-free carriages in the same way that 'quiet carriages/zones' exist.
- During periods of inclement weather, it is important that information regarding cancellations and alternative arrangements are provided in good time.

Caledonian Sleeper

Aberdeenshire Council believes that maintaining an overnight sleeper service between Aberdeen and London should be a priority given the important links between the North East of Scotland and London. The service is a valuable alternative to air, and offers the great advantage of providing direct access to/from the centre of London rather than the airports, which is particularly preferential to an early flight for business people. The service is also attractive to those wishing to travel more sustainably or who do not like to fly. It is considered that the provision of additional services, and service improvements (e.g. greater cabin space, toilet provision, privacy etc.) could increase passenger numbers on the service. In summary, Aberdeenshire Council believes that the sleeper service provides an important link and the Scottish Government should commit to its long-term future whether as part of, or as separate from, the new franchise.

Environmental issues

It is widely recognised that rail is a carbon efficient mode of transport compared to other modes. Improving the service for existing and potential customers through improved journey times, stopping patterns, fare/ticketing arrangements and passenger facilities etc. should lead to increased patronage and a reduced carbon footprint per passenger.