

Charles Kennedy's Response to the Rail 2014 Consultation

Sleeper Services

The threat of stopping some or all of the overnight sleeper services from the Highlands to London was a point of great concern to all concerned parties in the Consultation. I am glad, therefore, that the threat has been removed thanks to the injection of £50 million from the UK Coalition Government. It is to be hoped that the Scottish Government will follow through and provide the similar level of funding which it has promised.

Before this level of funding was confirmed, I requested that constituents contact me to air their concerns about the sleeper. I received a number of responses which I have included below.

The promise of funding to improve the services is a welcome one, but it is vital that the money is used in such a way as to secure the sleepers for decades to come. This, I believe, can be done in a number of ways.

Firstly, a full relaunch of the service in the South East of England, with an associated advertising campaign. This could bring a new generation of English-people into contact with the service, showing them this stylish, affordable and environmentally friendly mode of travel, boosting its revenue and the revenue of businesses in the Highlands which are reliant on tourism.

Secondly, the reintroduction of motorail. This service is used to great effect across Europe, and it would be particularly valuable for those travelling from England to the rural North of Scotland, where a car is a necessity. All sleeper platforms retain the infrastructure needed for the service, so its renewal would not necessitate major changes to stations.

Thirdly, a renewal of the sleeper rolling stock. This would bring the trains into compliance with UK laws on equalities, allowing disabled passengers to travel with ease and comfort.

Fourthly, the retention of – and if possible an increase in - the space available for goods carriage. I have been informed of a local business in the seafood industry, which uses the sleeper as a cost-effective way of taking fresh produce from the Highlands to London and the South of England overnight, providing the freshest seafood possible. This business provides jobs directly for more than 30 people in Ross-shire, and several hundred fishermen are indirectly supported by it. However, the amount of space available for their product has been reduced over the years while the cost has increased drastically. Due to the lack of space, customers must now be turned away. These jobs are very valuable, particularly those in the fishing villages of the West Coast. They must be protected.

Responses received from members of the public

"I support keeping the sleepers because it is the best way to travel such a long distance and wake up refreshed and ready to face a business meeting in London. The return trip is spectacular; a jewel in the Scottish crown. This is a unique and wonderful service and it should be treated as such."

"I support keeping the sleepers because...they sometimes make the difference between being able to be somewhere important or not. Weddings, Funerals, family occasions."

"The Sleeper is one of the best, and certainly the most enjoyable and convenient means of travelling to Fort William and the West Highlands in general, from the south-east of England. In this day and age we should be drawing closer together, and cutting the Sleeper would make that harder, not easier."

"The sleepers are fantastically useful for those of us that love the highlands but don't want to drive to them! I use them several times a year to get away from London and have 2 days skiing, walking or sightseeing. Without them I would probably save my money and start heading south to the Alps more frequently."

"I support keeping the sleepers because...I use it for visiting the area on holiday."

"I support keeping the sleepers because they provide a vial alternative to flying to London. Often an overnight trip is the most time and cost effective way to make the journey. They are also a wonderful (if under publicized) Gateway to the Highlands for tourists to the area."

"I support keeping the sleepers because...they are a vital link and provides not only an alternative to flying but also ensures a certain level of competition between the two services"

"I support keeping the sleepers because it is important that (the north of) Scotland has strong daily transport links with London for business and commerce. The productivity time lost by day travel or other types of transport is easily restored by the sleeper. It should be important to London as well as Scotland."

"I support keeping the sleepers because...to go to bed in Fort William and wake up in London is one of the few wonders of this land and this service should never be lost."

"I support keeping the sleepers because they are extremely useful for London-based individuals doing business in the Highlands and also for tourists flying in or out of London who wish to visit the area."

"I support keeping the sleepers because they are a key lifeline to the capital city both for business and leisure. We have very few options as with the appalling state of the A82 to Glasgow and the distances from airports, the sleeper is vital to our communications and the overall economy of the Highlands."

"I support keeping the sleepers because... They are a vital link in Scotland and should be prompted more!!!"

"I support keeping the sleepers because of both personal and business reasons. Personally I find using the sleeper service a very efficient and convenient way to visit the south of England. If anything I would like to see the service improved, arriving in Fort William in time for work on Monday morning, about 8am and the ability to book more than 12 weeks in advance. We also have our own tourism based business in Ardnamurchan which we are desperately trying to keep going and stay competetive. Our aim is provide year round employment for local people. This is becoming increasingly difficult if not impossible. We have already been hit by the unreasonable axing of the Laga, Drimnin, Tobermory community ferry service. The sleeper train is ideal for customers from the south, especially those coming for short breaks during the all important winter months. It is

ludicrous to even consider cutting this service unless your aim is to cut tourism in the Highlands of Scotland.”

“I support keeping the sleepers because..they are vital links to the Highlands. The road network is poor so please don't reduce our rail links too.”

“I support keeping the sleepers because they are the finest way to travel from London to Scotland. Nothing better than leaving London at night and waking up in Corrour.”

“My wife and I decided 5 years ago not to travel by 'plane anymore due to its carbon footprint. My wife now travels by train from Inverness to Germany via London to visit her family (x3 the cost of the plane!!). This journey takes two days and a night, and is only practicable if she can travel overnight to London on the sleeper. If this service stops there is no practicable alternative for travellers who want to do the right thing and avoid air travel. The UK and Scottish governments should 'walk the walk' and support eco travel alternatives, and the Caledonian Sleeper is one of these.”

“I support keeping the sleepers because it's by far the most pleasant and practical way to travel home to the highlands. It's important for businesses and people to maintain this essential link.”

“I support keeping the sleepers because... Fort William is my home town and location of my families businesses. If the sleeper service is removed, it will further reduce the amount of visitors to the Fort William area, which will lead to further businesses having to close and services stop. Thus making Fort William rural, inaccessible and undesirable to visit. It has Britain's highest mountain and is the Outdoor Capital of the UK!!!”

“I have to travel back to Scotland regularly and this is one of the few pain free ways to travel. It is an institution.”

Direct Rail Services

Direct services between Inverness and London fill a vital need for people in the Highlands and provide an important link for tourists from the South. These services must be protected and improved. Asking all passengers to change trains at Edinburgh will make it harder and less attractive for visitors to reach the Highlands, doing serious damage to our economy and harming our transport infrastructure unnecessarily. Direct trains are, additionally, far more environmentally friendly than flights, and their existence provides a form of competition with airlines flying south from Inverness.