

Consultation Questions

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Procuring rail passenger services

1. What are the merits of offering the ScotRail franchise as a dual focus franchise and what services should be covered by the economic rail element, and what by the social rail element?

Q1 comments: Rural and “lifeline” services need to be covered by the social rail element. Others could be left to an economic element of the franchise to give the opportunity for innovation, subject perhaps to minimum service obligations.

2. What should be the length of the contract for future franchises, and what factors lead you to this view?

Q2 comments: We can all see the way the wind is blowing, with the potential for either independence or a significant increase in the powers of the Scottish Parliament. Following independence or the implementation of “devolution max”, we might want to re-evaluate the structure of our rail industry. For example, might a state-owned or not-for-profit railway meet the needs of a newly independent Scotland better?

If we make the franchise short-term (a few years), when the time comes and we know which way our country will go, we would be in a position to choose to simply re-franchise as usual or make changes such as nationalisation. Or we might want to be able to alter aspects of the franchise only a few years from now, even with no constitutional changes. A short-term franchise gives us more options.

3. What risk support mechanism should be reflected within the franchise?

Q3 comments: No comment

4. What, if any, profit share mechanism should apply within the franchise?

Q4 comments: No comment

5. Under what terms should third parties be involved in the operation of passenger rail services?

Q5 comments: No comment

6. What is the best way to structure and incentivise the achievement of outcome measures whilst ensuring value for money?

Q6 comments: No comment

7. What level of performance bond and/or parent company guarantees are appropriate?

Q7 comments: No comment

8. What sanctions should be used to ensure the franchisee fulfils its franchise commitments?

Q8 comments: I suggest financial penalties built into the contract. The franchisee will likely be a profit-making company. With such an organisation, “hitting them in the wallet” seems likely to be effective as long as the penalties are sufficiently onerous and would provide useful funds to obtain the required services by other means, invest in the rail network, or simply to improve the Scottish Government’s financial position in these difficult times.

Achieving reliability, performance and service quality

9. Under the franchise, should we incentivise good performance or only penalise poor performance?

Q9 comments: Speaking as a psychologist, punishment is generally not an effective way to change behaviour for more than the short-term. What is more effective is rewarding positive behaviour. For example, such monetary rewards are being used in the NHS to encourage GPs and others to perform certain tasks with patients more frequently. Therefore, I recommend incentivising good performance, while retaining penalties for poor performance as a safety net.

Might it be helpful for financial incentives (or a share of them) for good performance to be payable to the individual staff of the franchisee, rather than to shareholder’s pockets? This might motivate staff better, who in the final analysis are the ones whose actions lead to good or poor performance. If staff knew they could expect a bonus for, say, good punctuality or customer service, this might improve performance day-to-day.

10. Should the performance regime be aligned with actual routes or service groups, or should there be one system for the whole of Scotland?

Q10 comments: No comment

11. How can we make the performance regime more aligned with passenger issues?

Q11 comments: No comment

12. What should the balance be between journey times and performance?

Q12 comments: Journey times seem to me to be a major priority on inter-city routes. When you travel from Aberdeen to another city in Scotland, you are often asking, “is it quicker on the train or in the car?”. Speed between cities is

a major advantage of rail travel – we should maximise it to encourage more people to travel by rail than by road.

13. Is a Service Quality Incentive Regime required? And if so should it cover all aspects of stations and service delivery, or just those being managed through the franchise?

Q13 comments: No comment

14. What other mechanisms could be used for assessing train and station quality?

Q14 comments: The report primarily focuses on assessments by professional staff of one organisation or another. What if travellers and members of the public were involved in the assessments?

There is a trend now for reviews of products and services by members of the public and many potential customers rely heavily on these – a prominent example are customer reviews on websites used to book hotels. While there are issues with, e.g. malicious or spoof reviews, these could be tackled by having verified users log in to a website to provide their assessments. Such users could be regular travellers/commuters, interested members of the public, or simply volunteers. They could use a pre-provided rating system for consistency or write free-text assessments. This might also reduce the cost of a professional corps of assessors, or could be used in addition to paid staff to increase the number of locations that could be rated.

Scottish train services

15. Can better use be made of existing train capacity, such as increasing the permitted standing time beyond the limit of 10 minutes or increasing the capacity limit? What is an acceptable limit for standing times on rail services?

Q15 comments: When I think of standing time, I think of commuters using the London Underground. I can tell you that most travellers in the rush hour are standing on the Underground for well over 10 minutes, but somehow everyone who needs to get to work. Priority seating for those less able to stand (e.g. elderly or infirm people, pregnant women) could be helpful. People might be more willing to stand if there were things to hold onto. On a “tube” train, there are bars and handholds everywhere – why not on Scottish trains too? The new London Overground rolling stock (which is based on the Turbostars running on Scotland’s railways) could be a good model to emulate.

16. Should the number of services making use of interchange stations (both rail to rail and rail to other modes) be increased to reduce the number of direct services? What would be the opportunities and challenges of this?

Q16 comments: My opinion is that the risk of putting travellers off the train and into their cars is too great if direct services are reduced. I think the potential costs outweigh the potential benefits. Rail user numbers are skyrocketing with the system as it is – making risky changes to the number of interchange

stations at this point is not a good idea. If passengers think (even if it isn't actually true) that journey times will be longer and they will have to wait on a cold platform for 10-20 minutes to change trains (especially in a Scottish winter), they will think twice before taking the train and simply drive straight to their destination by car.

17. Should Government direct aspects of service provision such as frequency and journey time, or would these be better determined by the franchisee based on customer demand?

Q17 comments: The Scottish Government needs to be making at least some directions as to these aspects, for at least the reason that a minimum service needs to be provided irrespective of commercial considerations. A railway runs for more than to make a profit, so customer demand cannot be the only criterion. However, it is the only one to which the profit-making franchisee will pay any attention, so it is for the Government to make sure that the other considerations are satisfied (such as reasonably frequent and quick journeys to less profitable destinations).

18. What level of contract specification should we use the for the next ScotRail franchise?

Q18 comments: The targeted form of specification really makes sense to me. I think this is a good idea.

19. How should the contract incentivise the franchisee to be innovative in the provision of services?

Q19 comments: What about some form of scheme whereby they can keep a share of the profits, perhaps by a distribution of that share to members of staff of the franchisee?

Scottish rail fares

20. What should be the rationale for, and purpose of, our fares policy?

Q20 comments: I think that fares policy needs to be guided by principles that reflect the mission of the railways to serve the people of Scotland. To me, these are fairness (fares should reflect distance travelled and not location or how many others wish to travel that route) and affordability (fares should be kept as low as possible so that all can afford to travel).

Fares policy to price out less-wealthy travellers to control demand is not acceptable to me as it is not fair. Demand for commuter travel is largely a factor of when people need to be at work. We could reduce demand for travellers to be there by 9am by providing Government encouragement and support for home working and flexible-hours working. This would be cheaper than building new infrastructure, lengthening trains, or creating passenger resentment by raising prices when people on low incomes are already at breaking point.

21. What fares should be regulated by government and what should be set on a commercial basis? Do your recommendations change by geographic area (the Strathclyde area example), or by type of journey (for example suburban or intercity)?

Q21 comments: No comment

22. How should we achieve a balance between the taxpayer subsidy and passenger revenue contributions in funding the Scottish rail network? At what rate should fares be increased, and how feasible would it be to apply higher increases to Sections of the network which have recently been enhanced?

Q22 comments: I don't think it is right to increase fares more on sections which have benefitted from improvements – surely the aim is to get more passengers using these improved sections and if they believe they will have to pay a premium this rise in numbers might not materialise.

I think it is fair for fares to rise each year in line with inflation (e.g. as RPI). There will always need to be a taxpayer subsidy – there is a taxpayer subsidy for road construction and maintenance too. The railways are a public benefit, contribute to economic activity and so this use of taxpayer funds is appropriate. The current balance seems fair to me – but cost savings will need to be made for reasons of the current state of public finances.

23. What should the difference be between peak and off-peak fares? Will this help encourage people to switch to travelling in the off-peak?

Q23 comments: No comment

Scottish stations

24. How should we determine what rail stations are required and where, including whether a station should be closed?

Q24 comments: I believe that stations should not be closed due to low usage unless a more frequent service is provided first. For example, low-usage stations such as Monifieth or Broughty Ferry are low-usage because very few trains call there and the few that do are timed inconveniently. Perhaps more frequent services to local destinations like Dundee would result in a boost to travellers.

I don't think stations should be closed totally, as in the future they may need to be re-opened and as seen at Laurencekirk and the discussion of re-opening Kintore, this is expensive if the station has been demolished or allowed to become derelict. It would be better to retain but mothball the platforms and track infrastructure etc., and any station building could be leased out for office space, or a café, or other business or community use. When needed, a simple refurbishment would allow trains to call there again.

25. What are the merits or issues that arise from a third party (such as a local authority or local business) being able to propose, promote and fund a station or service?

Q25 comments: No comment

26. Should only one organisation be responsible for the management and maintenance of stations? If this was the franchisee how should that responsibility be structured in terms of leasing, investment, and issues relating to residual capital value?

Q26 comments: No comment

27. How can local communities be encouraged to support their local station?

Q27 comments: No comment

28. What categories of station should be designated and what facilities should be available at each category of station?

Q28 comments: No comment

Cross-border services

29. Should cross-border services continue to go north of Edinburgh? In operating alongside ScotRail services, how do cross-border services benefit passengers and taxpayers? And who should specify these services, the Department of Transport or the Scottish Ministers?

Q29 comments: YES – it is essential that these services continue north of

Edinburgh. I feel more strongly about this than any other aspect of the report. Speaking as a resident of Aberdeen who travels several times a year to London, we have recently had to fight for such direct services to be continued by the East Coast franchise (and fortunately the Transport Minister at Westminster decided in our favour). The reasons for continuation include:

- 1) Travellers perceive having to make a change as inconvenient and an unwanted stressor – especially at a crowded station like Waverley. Travellers from Aberdeen or Inverness to London will switch in droves to air travel – contrary to all environmental policy. Travellers to other English cities will switch in droves to their cars. As I understand it this is not the aim of Transport Scotland.
- 2) The need to make a change adds significantly to journey time, and journey time is a major reason for inter-city travel by train. In the last 30 years, the introduction of faster trains reducing the London-Aberdeen journey to just over seven hours was a major advance. It is now proposed to turn back the clock to journey times that will be equivalent to that of 1950s diesel or even steam power – this seems irrational. Passengers will begin to see air travel as a very rational alternative.
- 3) If you are carrying luggage (as is usual when travelling long-distance) finding a place to put it is a struggle on crowded trains. Having to physically carry it from one train to another or hunt for a trolley while passengers stampede around you, then find a place to put it on the new train, will put many off. There is no need to bother with this if you take the car or plane instead – as many will quickly realise.
- 4) There is a major economic benefit to cross-border services. Without a direct rail link to London and major English cities, places in the north of Scotland such as Aberdeen and Inverness literally seem like the end of the world to those in the South of England. This has implications for investment in our cities, and for business travellers needing to reach between the two ends of the UK. Business travellers can work uninterrupted on the train - if time is money, time waiting on a cold platform for a connecting train at Waverley is time wasted.
- 5) Edinburgh Waverley and Glasgow Central are often overcrowded as it is. Decanting thousands more passengers per day into them for interchange reasons will cause very severe pressure on the already-stretched facilities at these stations.

While a resident of the central belt might not see the benefit of direct services to the north, to those who live in the North-East of Scotland to lose them would be a massive economic and social blow that in the climate now, we simply do not need. This review is an opportunity to improve services and make them fit for a 21st century Scotland – not make them worse or have journey times revert to levels not seen for decades by adding an unnecessary connection. Losing direct services to England would be disastrous for transport in my region.

I am satisfied for the Scottish Ministers to specify all service patterns once the train crosses the border – but it is VITAL that cross-border services continue north of the central belt.

30. Or should the cross-border services terminate at Edinburgh Waverley, allowing opportunities for Scottish connections? And if so, what additional benefits would accrue from having an Edinburgh Hub?

Q30 comments: NO – there are already ample opportunities for Scottish connections at Waverley. A passenger can currently enjoy uninterrupted travel from English cities to many towns and cities north of the central belt, or they can get off at Edinburgh and connect to many more not served directly.

Losing the three or four direct cross-border services a day to, say, Aberdeen would not free up many train paths for other connecting services. But more significantly, it will further isolate already geographically-remote towns and cities that happen to not be located in the central belt.

I cannot think of a single realistic benefit from having a hub at Edinburgh. For me this idea has no merit and the potential for great harm.

Rolling stock

31. What alternative strategies or mechanisms could be used to reduce the cost of the provision of rolling stock?

Q31 comments: What if the Scottish Government, or a body controlled by Transport Scotland, or Transport Scotland itself, were to act as the ROSCO?

32. What facilities should be present on a train and to what extent should these facilities vary according to the route served?

Q32 comments: The main priority for long-distance services are comfortable seats, a clean and reliable toilet, some form of catering service, and ample luggage space. Wi-Fi may be important for business passengers – as presumably this group is an important market this might be a priority. For short-distance or commuter services, a toilet may not be needed if the train stops every few minutes at a station with facilities, but a comfortable seat is still an asset.

Passengers – information, security and services

33. How should we prioritise investment for mobile phone provision and / or Wi-Fi type high-bandwidth services?

Q33 comments: Could there be some sort of sponsorship from a telecommunications company? Without turning the train into an advertising hoarding, a poster could say “Free Wi-Fi...” or “Wi-Fi on this train sponsored by...”. It makes sense to prioritise long-distance services first, or at least those frequently used by business travellers (e.g. Edinburgh-Glasgow). A small charge could be levied at first to pay the costs of installation.

34. How should we balance the need for additional seating capacity and retain the flexibility of a franchisee to offer first-class services if commercially viable?

Q34 comments: No comment

35. What issues and evidence should be considered prior to determining whether or not to ban the consumption of alcohol on trains?

Q35 comments:

Some issues may be that of the legality of a ban – would legislation be required? If a full ban was not feasible, a step in the right direction would be to discontinue sales of alcohol on trains.

Many incidents of rowdiness, aggression and unpleasantness are caused by groups of passengers who purchase a can of lager from the trolley. The lone trolley attendant suddenly seems fragile compared to four or more drunken men and essentially cannot say no to providing more alcohol. Some will bring on their own alcohol, but having it readily available from the trolley is an incentive to drink. Also, train guards and staff may be intimidated in asking

a rowdy group of drinkers to stop. Support from the British Transport Police might be required – such as the need to meet those drinking at the next station to escort them from the train. But the benefits would outweigh these costs.

Evidence to take into account could be the stories all passengers have of nightmare journeys spent close to groups who have been drinking, and the feeling of vulnerability and intimidation experienced – a feeling 10 times worse if travelling alone. Also, it has been found that most crime in Scotland takes place under the influence of alcohol. There may be an opportunity to reduce on-train crime before it takes place by restricting alcohol use. Also, the smoking ban has been successful in stopping on-train smoking, a similar ban may work for alcohol.

I strongly support a ban on alcohol consumption on trains. The feeling of lack of safety and security when there is a rowdy group of (usually) men who have been drinking heavily throughout their journey can be frightening. It has led to unpleasant journeys for many of us.

36. How can the provision of travel information for passengers be further improved?

Q36 comments: A useful feature would be more information in announcements about the cause of delays and how long passengers could be expected to wait. Many passengers are able to understand the reason for a delay if it is explained and remain calmer. Using a generic and vague line such as “due to an earlier incident” or “reasons beyond our control” might seem like good PR, but as passengers get angrier, more desperate for water or the toilet and speculate more, their opinion of the train company plummets.

Caledonian Sleeper

37. Should we continue to specify sleeper services, or should this be a purely commercial matter for a train operating company?

Q37 comments: YES – these services need to be specified as they could be very vulnerable if left to the commercial interests of an operating company. However, perhaps the company could have more flexibility to allow some innovation – such as on timing of services.

38. Should the Caledonian Sleeper services be contracted for separately from the main ScotRail franchise? Or should it be an option for within the main ScotRail franchise?

Q38 comments: No comment.

39. We would be interested in your views in the level and type of service that the Caledonian Sleeper Services should provide. Including:

- What is the appeal of the Caledonian Sleeper Service, and if there were more early and late trains would the appeal of the sleeper services change?

- What is the value of sleeper services to Fort William, Inverness and Aberdeen and are these the correct destinations, for example would Oban provide better connectivity?
- What facilities should the sleeper services provide and would you pay more for better facilities?

Q39 comments: The Caledonian Sleeper is a vital service for those of us who live in the north of Scotland. I do not see it as optional and to lose it would be a major loss to Aberdeen. However, it could benefit from some changes and investment; such overnight services are successful in many other European countries.

Its appeal lies in the fact that one can cover hundreds of miles from Scotland to London (or vice versa) without wasting a day travelling. A key part of this is that travellers arrive to most destinations before 9am, giving business travellers a full working day. Another advantage is that the service has a reputation for being convenient if one has a lot of luggage (I have made use of this myself), or one simply needs to leave after the last day service has left, say after a long day of work or sightseeing.

I would argue strongly that the Highland Sleeper services are the more valuable and perhaps even a priority over Lowland services. If services are to be cut, I suggest investigating the possibility of discontinuing the Lowland Sleeper due to the speed of current day trains. This is because it takes much longer to reach Fort William, Inverness or Aberdeen than it does along the high-speed lines from London to the Central Belt. One can travel from London to Edinburgh or Glasgow in about four hours; it is over eight hours to Inverness. Tourists and business people can thus be in Aberdeen or Fort William, etc. in little longer than it takes to get to Edinburgh as much of the journey takes place while passengers sleep. Those attracted to the sleeper for this reason will see only one alternative – air travel.

However, two factors put some off the sleeper. One is that attractive low fares are difficult or impossible to book using the website and only the most expensive seem available by other means. Passengers give up and go to a low-fares airline website instead. The website seems to be the poor relation of the ScotRail site and could benefit from improvements. These website changes would be inexpensive to implement.

A second factor is the facilities available. The intention of the sleeper is to arrive ready for the day, but a lack of shower facilities at most stations means arriving smelly and unwashed. Showers could be provided for a small supplement or fee (£3 or so) at terminus stations like Aberdeen, Euston and others – they should not be restricted to first-class ticket holders. A second issue is the need to share with a stranger if travelling alone; solo travellers such as me think twice because of this. This is less easy to solve – perhaps a future operator would have innovative ideas about the layout of the sleeper carriages that might create more single cabins. Perhaps Japanese-style “capsules” (as at a capsule hotel) in one carriage, catering for solo travellers with attractive fares, while duos could continue to use the current twin cabins.

Environmental issues

40. What environmental key performance indicators should we consider for inclusion in the franchise agreement or the High Level Output Specification?

Q40 comments: No comment