

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:

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

Q2 comments: 5 years. Given the almost total lack of competition, longer franchise contracts do not make service improvement a high enough priority.

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

Q3 comments: I'm not sure but feel it should be balanced by a mechanism that ensures that a significant proportion of any profits are re-invested to improve infrastructure and service

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

Q4 comments:

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

Q5 comments: This should be limited. The privatisation and division of different aspects of service between different companies has not been of benefit to passengers or taxpayers and leads to a system that barely functions in some cases.

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

Q6 comments:

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

Q7 comments:

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

Q8 comments: If firm commitments are made then the franchisee should face losing the franchise if they are not met. The franchisee has been given the opportunity to profit from running a service and it is reasonable that commitments be met in return. Non-essential requirements should obviously carry lower, but genuine, sanctions.

Achieving reliability, performance and service quality

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

Q9 comments: Both, although penalising poor performance is more important. Numbers of passengers and revenues will almost certainly increase regardless of performance, because competition is so limited and rail travel often essential. Penalties for poor performance are therefore necessary to ensure real improvements, and only government is in a position to impose these.

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: Generally, the performance regime should apply across the network

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

Q11 comments: By giving passengers a meaningful way of responding to problems and a role in shaping the performance regime

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

Q12 comments: There is absolutely no case for viewing this as a 'balance'. Journey times should be based on the speed at which trains can travel on the track, and trains should be expected to stick to these times. Rail travel in Scotland is already slow (in many cases no faster, or indeed slower, than driving the equivalent route) and increasing travelling time so that trains appear to be more reliable benefits no one but the train company. Delays caused by factors outside the franchisee's control are not predictable in any case, and so increasing journey times would do little to ameliorate them.

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: Yes, and it should cover all aspects of rail travel. It is important that Scotland has functioning and useable railways, and stations and other facilities play a very important role in that.

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

Q14 comments: Assessing train and station quality is quite straightforward and could be simply achieved through occasional inspections. Failing that, the passengers who use these services can provide feedback. Currently the main problems are that stations lack facilities (including adequate heating in many cases), and that trains are often unreliable and overcrowded. These should be simple issues to resolve.

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: I am not aware of a standing time limit of 10 minutes, or of Scotrail making any attempts to adhere to it. The train journey I have made regularly for the past 3 years is usually overcrowded on a Friday evening, and I often have to stand for 50 minutes as a result. Neither extra carriages nor services have ever been provided, and tickets are charged at full price. If increased standing times are being considered, ticket prices must be reduced to reflect this. The decision to make Scottish trains even more overcrowded and unpleasant should not be taken lightly.

Having said that, it is likely that better use could be made of existing capacity through more flexible and responsive use of carriages. Many of the overcrowding issues are very predictable, and moving empty carriages from quiet routes to busy ones should be easily possible.

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: No. As any regular train traveller knows, every change significantly increases travelling times and the chances of delays and missed connections, not to mention discomfort when waiting in cold and inhospitable stations. Long-distance services should certainly be maintained, and linking services from these to small stations could then be used to improve journey times and access.

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 difficulty with determining these based on customer demand is that the great majority of customers have no choice about when and with which company to travel. Scotrail has little motivation to improve journey times or to offer extra services until existing ones are overflowing, because passengers have to travel with them in any case. Government must therefore play some role in directing these aspects of the service.

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

Q18 comments:

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

Q19 comments: This could only be achieved if there was competition. Scotrail has a virtual monopoly and so is unlikely to innovate unless contractually obliged to.

Scottish rail fares

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

Q20 comments: The basic function of the rail network is to enable people to travel easily, quickly and reliably around Scotland for business, personal and recreational purposes. The use of the rail network for these purposes is of great general benefit (not least in decreasing pressure on the road network) and fares policy should broadly be intended to encourage the use of railways. This requirement should be balanced against the need to maximise revenue in order to improve services, but in no case should fares be designed to discourage travel at certain times. It is also important to recognise that mismanagement of the franchise arrangements to date have left passengers very cynical about the purposes of fare increases, which are regular and large, and have not resulted in improvements in service. Any increases should therefore be explicitly linked to spending plans.

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: There's a clear case for government to regulate fares in rural areas where commercial charges would be very high, but some regulation is needed in all cases, at least to prevent dramatic fare increases designed only

to increase the profits of the franchisee. Again, government has a role to play in promoting rail travel and ensuring that it is accessible to all.

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: As a passenger, it is hard to understand how fares can be as high as they are and increase as rapidly as they do, while the level of service remains dramatically inferior to that everywhere else in Europe and does not seem to improve. There is obviously a legacy of under-investment in Scotland's rail network, and unfortunately it is probably necessary for government to address this itself if a functioning network is a serious priority. Recent fare increases and a concurrent lack of improvement in rail travel suggest that, without significant taxpayer subsidy, fares would have to be set at a level that would force almost all passengers off the railways before a serious impression could be made on the problems that already exist.

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: Probably not. The vast majority of people have to travel on-peak, and in fact it is desirable that they do so rather than increasing traffic on the roads. Attempting to price them off trains at the times they need to use them is not helpful and will not be successful. Furthermore, if this was a genuine aim then it could be achieved through decreases in off-peak fares rather than the relentless and cynical inflation of on-peak fares that currently occurs.

Scottish stations

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

Q24 comments:

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: The main issue is the implication that stations or services not chosen would be inferior to those that are.

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: Yes, and a great deal of investment is needed. Many stations have obviously had large amounts of money spent on the installation of ticket barriers, which are intended to benefit Scotrail but do nothing for passengers and indeed have resulted in many station entrances being closed in order to funnel people through the barriers. If this kind of money is available it should be spent first on providing heated waiting areas and accurate travel information.

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

Q27 comments: It's not clear that they should, in the absence of any real government or franchisee investment.

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

Q28 comments:

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 they should. These services are of clear benefit to passengers in that they are frankly far superior to Scottish services, being more comfortable, faster, and having better facilities. They also provide some (not enough) much-needed competition for ScotRail. They decrease journey times, allow for easy and reliable long-distance journeys, and so also benefit the taxpayer by allowing greater movement between parts of the UK – surely an important consideration for many Scottish businesses. Rather than scaling back these services, they could be used as alternatives for short-haul air travel between Scotland and England. The services should presumably be specified in cooperation between the Department of Transport and Scottish Ministers. Successful examples of such cooperation can be found in every other country in Europe.

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, they should not. In addition to removing the benefits identified above, this system would produce inferior service and is unlikely to be workable. Edinburgh Waverley is already overcrowded and, like any

station, is not really a pleasant place to have to spend time. Forcing people to get off cross-border trains and board dirty, cramped and often delayed ScotRail services would be a highly counterproductive move for Scotland. Also, as above, every change increases journey times, the chances of missed connections and delays. It is important to bear in mind that people use trains to get between places, if possible in a quick and comfortable manner. Train travel has many social, economic and environmental benefits, and so the principal aim of regulation should be to better enable people to achieve this. I doubt that any other European country would consider making all train passengers disembark and change onto other services when they cross the border.

Rolling stock

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

Q31 comments: Presumably there is some expertise on this within government or Scotrail; from a passenger's perspective the reported cost of rolling stock is unjustifiably high.

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

Q32 comments: Adequate seating, heating and toilets are essential.

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: These are useful, but making train services reliable and affordable should be higher priorities.

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: If this (unclear) question is implying that a service can be first-class without providing adequate seating capacity then its premise is wrong.

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

Q35 comments: The evidence that the majority of passengers who drink on trains cause no problems, and the principle that legislation affecting everyone should not be imposed to try and change the behaviour of a few. If behaviour

is a problem on trains then conductors and police should be given powers to control it.

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

Q36 comments: The provision of information could be improved in numerous ways. Most importantly, accurate information must be given when trains are delayed. Almost every time a train is late into a station it is listed as 'on time' until several minutes after it was due, then a few minutes are repeatedly added to its expected arrival time until it is either cancelled or eventually turns up. It is clear from the frequency and predictability of this pattern that Scotrail don't actually know where their trains are at any given moment. I have often spent up to an hour waiting for a train that is always listed as being expected in a few minutes, only to find that it had never left the previous station or even left its point of origin. The result, of course, is that passengers are left standing on cold platforms with no way of making alternative plans or even estimating when they might arrive at their destination. This really is not acceptable and if Scotrail persists in wasting passenger's time in this way then it should be made to pay for it (I have lost several days at work as a result of exactly this pattern of misinformation). If delays of unknown duration are expected then a minimum time to arrival should be provided, based on the train's current location.

Also, accurate information should be provided on websites and phone lines. In recent storms the National Rail Enquiries website warned of delays but showed services operating over the Tay Bridge when in fact the bridge had been shut for hours. Again, this meant that passengers were unable to make alternative travel arrangements.

The provision of accurate information is a very basic function of train companies and government should have no tolerance for the current failure of Scotrail to achieve this.

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: It seems sensible to have sleeper services operating, and they seem to be popular (if they were more reliable they might be more commercially viable).

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:

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:

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: