

# The Royal Society of Edinburgh

## **Towards a Transport Strategy for Scotland: Consultation on Rail Priorities**

The Royal Society of Edinburgh (RSE) is pleased to respond to the Scottish Executive Transport Division consultation on rail priorities within a transport strategy for Scotland. This response has been compiled by the General Secretary, Professor Gavin McCrone and the Policy Officer, Dr Marc Rands, with the assistance of a number of Fellows with considerable experience in this area.

Scotland, like the North East of England is one of Europe's peripheral regions and the railways make a vital contribution in reducing that peripherality. Thus cross-border routes are essential from all of Scotland's major cities (including Inverness) to connect to major international gateways, such as London, the Channel Tunnel, as well as major docklands and airports. In that way, railways have much to contribute to Scotland's business efficiency and, whilst railways have only a tiny sector of the freight traffic (8-10%), they are critical for the movement of labour, for suppliers, customers, company directors and managers. It has been estimated that 85% of investment decisions have a 'railway dimension.'

Therefore, in taking a 20 (plus) year view, it is not enough to think of reliability or punctuality of services as priorities, top or otherwise. We have been preoccupied by these because the combination of ageing rolling stock, progressively deteriorating infrastructure and lack of customer focus in the 1980's and 1990's generated the call for greatly improved reliability and punctuality. The evidence shows that improvements in these are now being achieved year on year. What is now called for is a long term perspective and an element of vision. Over the next twenty years and more the parameters of transportation are likely to change radically as those modes that currently have a comparative advantage over rail find that this advantage is eroded by rising fuel costs and increased congestion in the air and on land exacerbated by demographic pressures.

For medium to longer term planning decisions and priorities, we need to take these as read and think of how the Scotland of the future can be as competitive, accessible and pleasant as possible; where rail has an important role in carrying passengers and freight; where it is an efficient and effective carrier; and where it is in competition with the alternatives. It therefore goes without saying that any long term plans for railways in Scotland must be part of a carefully considered strategy covering all forms of transport, including blue sky thinking of new modes of moving people and freight.

In addition, although rail devolution is "*helpful in giving Scottish Ministers the opportunity to ensure that the rail network and services in Scotland are the best they can be for the people and businesses of Scotland*" (Consultation Document Summary), much of the benefit could be lost if strategies cannot be implemented because of the difficulties of taking decisions/getting necessary approvals. There should be consideration of whether primary legislation is desirable to address this.

The different areas for consideration are now addressed below:

### **Question 1:**

- a) **Following the delivery of the current major projects, should we change the focus of investment in the railways to concentrate on securing the benefits from the existing network, or are there further new benefits that rail could achieve?**

Investment need not be exclusively one thing or the other. The Scottish Executive should focus on strategic development of the network and set out some strategic goals. For example, the promotion of tourism is likely to remain high on the list of priorities of any Scottish administration. Direct rail links to the main Scottish airports (i.e. not just Edinburgh and Glasgow) should continue to be given high priority in the development of a comprehensive long term transport strategy

- b) **Would you like to see current rail resources used in different ways? Please be specific.**

There could be a case for giving priority in the rail network to passengers. Such a move would reduce track-wear, increase capacity and speed-up passenger movements. The freight percentage is now small and, though important, should not be allowed to impede the development of fast passenger traffic.

### **Question 2:**

**a) Are there measures that could be taken to attract new customers to rail, and to encourage more people to use the train instead of the car?**

Demand should be improvement led. There needs to be fast and frequent links between Scotland's major cities. Speed is essential if rail is to attract traffic from the roads. But good public passenger transport also means properly integrated transport (e.g. fly/rail/bus options in Switzerland), which in turn means finding a way (despite the acknowledged ticket value issues) of integrating ticketing between heavy rail, light rail and bus.

Railway customers are also a 'gathered congregation' and travel to stations by road. Thus railways need good roads and excellent parking. Without those facilities passengers will tend to stay on the roads. However, there are other social factors that need mentioning. For example:

- An ageing population may either voluntarily or of necessity give up driving cars, but they are often fearful of travel by train. At user level it is vital that rail travel is safe, particularly in the evenings/at night. Any rail strategy should have a safety strategy at the heart of it; if the public perceive any significant risk of using the train, it will be a difficult and lengthy process to change attitudes (such as with the New York subway)
- Families are now increasingly dispersed, encouraging travel by car or rail or both.
- Long distance commuting to work is growing, and where inner city jobs grow faster than inner city homes long distance commuting will become inevitable.

**b) Is reliability and punctuality of services still the top priority for passengers? If not, what do you consider is the top priority?**

Reliability and punctuality have come out as the top priorities for customers in so many surveys stretching back over such a long period that it is unlikely that this will change in the near future, unless for some reason e.g. terrorism, the railway becomes perceived as fundamentally unsafe. Overcrowding and cleanliness generally come next, although it must be said that priorities depend on journey type, particularly length. Longer distance passengers understandably rate ability to get a seat much higher (i.e. first) than do commuters with a 10 minute journey.

Safety is also of equal importance. Not only track/wheel safety but, as mentioned above, a freedom from the real or perceived 'booze and blade' culture which is a fear on some trains and stations especially in the dark hours.

A focus on getting these major issues right remains the best way to attract people to use the train in the short term. The policy issue is that the weight given to each factor by the Executive should reflect the importance placed on them by passengers. This has not always been the case in the past when, for example, incentive regimes may have had a disproportionate effect on management priorities.

**c) What is the top priority for freight customers?**

Good rail and road links are essential for freight customers.

**d) For cross border passenger services, should priority be a quick journey to the final destination (e.g. London, Birmingham, and Manchester) or the ability to stop at intermediate stations?**

Cross-border passengers should have access to both fast journeys to major final destinations and the ability to access intermediate stations, although not necessarily on the same services.

**e) If reliability and punctuality of services is the top priority for customers, should we generally only allow changes to the network that provide a net benefit to customers in terms of better reliability and punctuality?**

There will always be occasions where more public utility can be achieved at some sacrifice of punctuality and reliability, but this does not preclude recovery of the previous standard of performance through management effort within Network Rail and the train operators. The top priority should not be so dominant that it precludes management effort on everything else.

**f) Are there opportunities for a different, and more appropriate, approach to fares setting in particular areas of Scotland or for particular rail routes, or for particular passenger?**

Market segmentation for train users is well understood, and Train Operating Companies' (TOCs') fares structures have evolved to reflect this. TOCs should be allowed to profit from the successful commercial management of their businesses, as this will provide the greatest incentive to follow market requirements. If taxpayer or company subsidies are to be given then they should apply to all transport modes, and if every senior citizen in Scotland is to enjoy free bus travel throughout the whole of Scotland, why not also rail travel?

However, in the Central Belt, the growth in patronage experienced over recent years has meant that the exhaustion of the capacity of the existing network in terms of platform lengths and timetable slots (not just train lengths) is now in sight. Under these circumstances the pressure is likely to be towards pricing to control demand.

### Question 3:

**a) How should we prioritise services on different routes, where the fixed network is close to capacity and choices have to be made?**

In many ways the decision has already been made in the way the industry has developed. For example the steady increase in the percentage of patronage on the Edinburgh-Glasgow line originating from intermediate stops is a direct result of the improvement in the service pattern serving these locations. Making sweeping changes that might seriously disadvantage communities already served by rail is politically unacceptable.

Alternative courses of action become more practicable in a growth situation and therefore options must be explored for the further enhancement of network capacity. This is also, of course, an area in which the existence of strategic goals and objective decision criteria would be useful, and there could, for example, be a priority given to passengers over freight.

**b) Should the general presumption for Scotland as a whole be to prioritise according to current and anticipated demand for the service, i.e. what will give the maximum benefit to the economy?**

This is the most logical approach, but perhaps the phrase "maximising public utility" could be used instead of "what is best for the economy."

**c) Do you have specific regional priorities that might differ from this? For example, are there particular routes or services in your region where you believe the predominant role should be to meet social inclusion or environmental objectives, rather than to grow the economy?**

Although there may be political imperatives to develop transport strategies for Scotland at three levels (national, regional and local) the splitting means that the selection of transport project priorities at the local/regional level (e.g. projects that are seen as being the most "deliverable" or provide "value for money" or are the local "pet projects") may not be the best fit (or fit at all) with national or even regional/local "policy". What weightings will be attached to policy, deliverability and value for money? Will decisions be top down or bottom up and how will all of this relate to the development of a coherent, economic long term rail strategy?

Overall, the best way to achieve social inclusion and environmental objectives is to promote the growth of the economy. In a growth situation making provision for these activities/issues is practicable; in a static constrained situation it is much less so.

**d) Do you consider that the priorities for specific routes should vary at different times of the day or during different seasons?**

There is a balance to be struck here. On the downside, business requires predictability and reliability. Complex patterns of change and usage may be of interest to railway planners, but they are a turnoff for the public and private business, both of whom are likely to turn to the road. On the other hand market segmentation has been very successful in the railways and we already have considerable differentiation of the market offering. This is effective as it is consistent within each targeted segment e.g. commuters want to travel in the morning and evening and not in the middle of the day.

Overall we would favour such segmentation of the market offering. This is with the principle in mind of maximising public utility as well as 'smoothing peaks' and utilising uneconomically empty off-peak trains.

**e) Would the increase in passenger kilometres and the volume of freight being carried be an appropriate proxy measure for the benefit to the economy, or are there better measures?**

It depends. Only if they represent real growth, and not merely substitution for other transport modes.

**f) How should we compare the benefits from passenger and freight services?**

We would consider the maximising of public utility the most desirable. This should be done by examining the opportunity costs of removing the facility. For example overcrowding on the roads; relocation of organisations from city centres vs. increases in lorry motorway miles; impacts on 'wear and tear' on the tracks and the problems of high-speed passenger trains sharing the same tracks as slower-moving freight. etc. The balance exists between the extreme points where the opportunity costs become unsustainable.

#### Question 4:

- a) **Do you have specific changes you would like to see to the railway? Please be clear what the change would achieve in terms of the overall objectives of promoting economic growth, social inclusion, health and protection of our environment.**

Money should be used to maximise and improve the existing network before any new ventures are embarked upon. It is a disaster for Scotland that the full upgrade of the West Coast rail link from London to Glasgow has been thwarted. The new Scottish Transport Agency should ask for a public re-examination of the costs of the full upgrade which, if not completed, will progressively disadvantage Scotland both in respect of business and tourism. It should be noted, in this context, that the extension of the Jubilee Line in South East London cost over £3.5bn).

In addition, electrification of the railway between Scotland's major cities, taking in other centres such as Dundee, Perth, Stirling, could be considered. It seems inappropriate, and puts rail at a serious disadvantage, that it takes nearly 4 hours to get to Inverness from Edinburgh/Glasgow, when driving can cover the distance in only 60-70% of that time. Working on an electrified grid of this nature could also lead to a reduction in carbon dioxide emissions, especially if road transport could be encouraged to switch to rail.

Over the longer term we should be aiming to match the type of high speed services increasingly being developed on the Continent. This would indicate, for example, a new high speed dedicated spinal track from Aberdeen to London, linking with Scotland's main cities and cities in the north of England. It would also help to integrate Scotland with high speed services into Continental Europe.

Another priority would be the development of fast commuter services and integrated track network within the Central Belt and not just the Glasgow Edinburgh line. If congestion in the cities is to be prevented from worsening, thought should be given to new commuter services either by light or heavy rail. This is fairly well developed round Glasgow, less so around Edinburgh. For the latter the services to Fife, North Berwick and the successfully reopened line to Bathgate are important, as will be the service to Galashiels if implemented. But other centres, which were once linked by rail and are developing as commuter towns such as Pennycuik and Peebles, deserve consideration.

- b) **Are there specific changes in your area that could improve integration of rail services with other forms of transport?**

There must be imaginative and joined-up thinking of heavy rail, light rail, guided bus, stage and express bus services and bus taxis relating to the movement of commuters in and out of work (each day), retail shopping (each day), the leisure market (weekends and evenings) and tourism (seasonal features). If a rail strategy is developed too rigidly or without proper consideration of the dynamics of other forms of public transportation (including the ways that fare policies may develop), it will most likely fail, leaving in its wake substantial uneconomic investment.

- c) **Should any additional future investment in the rail network be focussed on the routes that provide the maximum benefit to the economy, where there is the highest use or potential use by people or freight?**

Undoubtedly. It is the very first and most fundamental principle of business planning that an organisation should play to its strengths.

#### Additional Information

Copies of this response are available from the Policy Officer, Dr Marc Rands (email: [mrands@royalsoced.org.uk](mailto:mrands@royalsoced.org.uk)) or from the RSE web site: [www.royalsoced.org.uk](http://www.royalsoced.org.uk).

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