TRANS*form* Scotland

the campaign for sustainable transport

Debate on Central Scotland Rail Improvements

Wednesday 21st February 2008, 5.00pm
Briefing from TRANS*form* Scotland

1. Introduction

TRANS*form* Scotland welcomes this motion. We believe that much more needs to be done to realise the full potential of our railways as a key component of a sustainable transport system for Scotland.

Scotland's railways have suffered systematic under-investment over the past four decades. As a result, rail journey times between Scotland's main cities have become uncompetitive with the car: the flagship Edinburgh-Glasgow route is slower than it was thirty-five years ago, while some Edinburgh-Perth and Edinburgh-Dundee train journeys take longer than 100 years ago. It is therefore very welcome that the Scottish Government has chosen to improve capacity and journey times on the Scottish inter-city network by prioritising investment on electrification.

2. The benefits that railways provide

Railways provide substantial economic benefits through the relief of road congestion and the opportunities to engage in productive work while travelling. Rail is also a substantially safer mode of travel, and offers substantial environmental advantages over competing forms of transport. In particular, rail offers significant advantages in terms of carbon emissions compared to road and air transport. [note 1]

Trains can also offer major advantages over road transport in terms of toxic air pollutants which every year contribute to thousands of premature deaths in Scotland. This is particularly the case with rail freight, which produces (per tonne-kilometre) a small fraction of the particulates, carbon monoxide, nitrogen oxides and volatile organic compounds emitted by even the latest, most 'environmentally friendly' Heavy Goods Vehicles.

3. Scottish Government policy

In stark contrast to the situation south of the Border, the Scottish Government has a substantial programme of rail reopening projects. Hamilton-Larkhall was re-opened in 2006, the new through freight route from Stirling via Alloa to Kincardine is under construction, and the 'Phase 1' Edinburgh Waverley upgrade will be completed early in 2008.

It appears that the Government has recognised the importance within Scotland of speeding up **inter-urban journey times** so that they become more competitive with the car. The Government's aim to revise stopping patterns between Glasgow/Edinburgh and Perth/Dundee/Aberdeen "to reduce inter-urban journey times" [note 2] would be a good start (if it's complimented by feeder services), but this must be followed through by more radical action.

4. Rail electrification

Just 23% of the Scottish rail network is electrified, compared to 39% for Britain as a whole, and substantially higher figures in most European countries. Rail electrification will help to reduce Scotland's reliance on oil, while improving our inter-city rail links will need to form an important part of efforts to tackle climate change emissions from transport.

For **Edinburgh-Glasgow travel**, there are already three routes (the main 'E&G Line' via Falkirk, the Shotts Line, and the route via Carstairs) with the Airdrie-Bathgate project providing a fourth. Over the past decade, the E&G Line has seen a doubling of its frequency; however, coupled with increasing patronage at intermediate stops, the end-to-end journey time is now slower than it was 35 years ago.

A strategic approach to route development is long overdue, and it is welcome that the new Government has chosen to prioritise the E&G Line via Falkirk as the 'flagship' route between the cities. The Government's decision to electrify this route is the correct decision for providing a high-quality service between the cities at reasonable cost and in a reasonable timescale.

We do not support alternative proposals for a 'bullet train' between the cities. A new route is simply not required to get substantial reductions in journey time from the current 48 minutes down towards 30 minutes. Furthermore, the new infrastructure for 'maglev' type hovertrains would be enormously expensive and very destructive of the urban fabric unless long sections were put in tunnel. Ultra-high-speed trains are highly energy-intensive, and need vast amounts of new traffic to justify their existence – thereby creating the danger of increasing rather than reducing overall CO_2 levels from transport.

To upgrade the quality of the **main routes north of the Central Belt**, the obvious step-change in infrastructure would be wider electrification (e.g. from Edinburgh to Aberdeen), bringing cleaner and quieter trains with fast acceleration to cut journey times.

5. Railcard

Getting more people out of cars and planes and into trains isn't just about new infrastructure and new trains: the 'soft issues' such as price and quality of journey experience are absolutely crucial to modal switch. The Government's rail programme must also consider non-infrastructural issues such as station quality, train comfort, wi-fi networks on train lines, and better ticketing.

The British rail system currently offers three railcards: the Young Person's Railcard, the Senior Railcard and the Family Railcard. However, for other users, there is no financial incentive for regular rail users other than season tickets (which are only appropriate for some travellers). This differs from other European countries, where price reductions are offered in line with the value of the railcard that is purchased.

Railfuture have for some time campaigned for a national railcard along the lines of that seen in countries such as Germany and Switzerland. Research commissioned by Railfuture found that "3 million people would probably buy a £20 card giving 30% reductions on off-peak fares if it was introduced into Britain". [note 3]

Given the success of the national concessionary fare scheme for bus users, and the limited progress being made by the UK Department for Transport, we think it timely that the Scottish Government investigate the introduction of a Scottish national railcard along the lines of that seen in continental Europe.

6. Conclusions

Scotland's rail system has a much bigger part to play in a sustainable future for our country. After many years of work by rail campaigners, the Scottish Government is at last mapping out the shape of a serious railway development programme. But in the era of Peak Oil and worsening climate change, truly radical action will be required to equip our rail system to meet the coming challenges of the low-carbon economy.

The railway is not a panacea for all our transport problems, but for inter-urban traffic, conurbation commuter routes, vital rural links, freight and international connections, it can do much more. Economic, social and environmental needs all point to a properly-funded and revitalised rail system. While a variety of players in the private and public sectors have important roles to play in unlocking the railway's potential, the key lies with the Scottish Government.

Notes:

1. See, for example, the tables in TRANS*form* Scotland (2006) *Are High-Speed Railways good for the Environment?*
2. Scottish Executive (2006) *Scotland's Railways*
3. http://www.railfuture.org.uk/tiki-index.php?page=National+Rail+Card

TRANS*form* Scotland is the national sustainable transport alliance, campaigning for a more sustainable and socially-just transport system. Our membership includes bus, rail and shipping operators; local authorities; national environment and conservation groups; consultancies; and local transport campaigns.

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