

ScotRail – May 2022 Timetable Consultation

Introduction

Transport Focus is the independent watchdog for transport users. This paper sets out our response to the consultation proposals of ScotRail.

General Comments

We note the detailed assessment covering; performance, demand, capacity, revenue, costs and future timetables.

We further note the intention that the May 2022 timetable will be a new starting point for future timetable development. ScotRail intend to use lessons learnt during the Covid-19 pandemic, along with new methods of analysis, to continue refining and improving the timetable on offer. We trust that where particular issues of consumer detriment are identified in the consultation process that refinements and improvements can be made and implemented quickly in advance of future timetable iterations.

It is considered that the timetable will provide enough capacity to carry the number of passengers who travelled with ScotRail in 2019-20, enable a better performing railway, whilst having a positive impact on ScotRail and Network Rail's operating costs.

We have overlayed that detailed assessment with a passenger assessment based on our evidence base.

Timetable to match passenger priorities

A key pillar of any timetable rewrite must include the delivery of a reliable timetable day in and day out.

The most important priority passengers¹ want is a reliable railway that delivers on the promise of the timetable day in and day out. Improving value for money is a close second and while passengers may not realistically expect prices to drop, they do expect the basic promises of the industry to be met in return for their fares.

The third highest priority is getting a seat on the train. In recent years the railway has succeeded in attracting passengers but has increasingly struggled to provide the extra capacity to meet this demand. More and more services have run on increasingly congested infrastructure, often with a knock-on hit to reliability and punctuality.

¹ Rail passengers' priorities for improvement – July 2020

The fourth priority relates to frequency. Passengers want a sufficient frequency of service.

Since the research was undertaken the railway has, like the rest of our lives, been dramatically changed by the Covid-19 pandemic. A busy and crowded network too often vulnerable to disruption and delays has, been transformed into a much quieter, lower frequency, more punctual railway.

Timetable to match changing travel patterns

ScotRail's proposed timetable is geared to being a foundation to encourage a return to public transport and will need to be proactive in attracting people back. It must ensure that public transport is genuinely appealing given that discretionary travellers may have a choice about which mode to use.

Our work on returning to rail² shows there is a distinct disparity between those who have used public transport and those who have not used public transport recently – the latter are much more concerned about using public transport again.

A cohesive message needs to be supported from the top to show public transport is clean and safe and ready to use and targeted through channels to reach and give confidence to those who have not been travelling.

Building confidence³ in rail, requires recognition that:

- people are still at very different stages on the journey back to 'normal', with a wide range of attitudes
- space for social distancing is still important, but people appreciate it often won't be practical and it's being replaced with looser efforts to give people more personal space when they can
- for now, face coverings are the key safety measure people are relying on to help them feel safe
- many current passengers, and even more of those who have stayed away, still feel anxious about using public transport
- ScotRail need to work to maintain the additional Covid-19 measures and communications that are currently in place to reassure passengers and help them feel safe.

² Return to rail: what do passengers want? – July 2021

³ Beyond social distancing: building confidence in public transport – September 2021

A timetable that is both capable of refinement and improvement is required to consider changes in future travel patterns. We have recently focussed on rail commuters⁴ that could work from home and the extent to which they plan to commute in future.

This latest survey largely confirms our previous findings and that – for those that can work from home – a hybrid commuting pattern is expected.

It's important to note in this latest survey we focused on people who used to be regular commuters by rail and those whose work does not require them to physically attend their workplace all the time. This was not to ignore those who have to travel to work all the time in order to do their job, but by focusing on those who may have a choice we can get a sense of the behavioural change.

The latest findings include:

- Just over two thirds (68 per cent) of those who used to commute by rail (and who do not have to physically attend their place of work) say they will commute by rail in autumn/winter 2021.
- There remains a significant drop in those who say they will commute five days a week –from 42 per cent pre Covid-19 to just six per cent for the rest of 2021. This is lower than in our November 2020 survey, when 43 per cent said that they commuted five days a week before Covid-19 and 12 per cent said that they would 'when Covid no longer posed a risk'.
- There is an increase in those saying they will commute from one to three days a week. Those saying they will commute one day a week has increased from eight per cent pre Covid-19 to 31 per cent in future; those commuting two days has increased from 10 per cent to 33 percent, and for three days from 15 per cent to 21 per cent.
- 57 per cent of future rail commuters, who will travel to their place of work for fewer than five days in a typical week, agree that they expect to work mainly from home and only travel into their workplace when required. 44 per cent say that they expect to have a routine commuting pattern.
- Employers remain generally supportive of working from home. Nearly eight out of 10 rail commuters who do not physically have to attend their place of work say their employer is supportive of staff working from home. Only five per cent say their employer is unsupportive.

⁴ Future rail commuting survey – September 2021

In the short-term Covid-19 is bound to have an impact on passengers' priorities – not least when it comes to personal safety, space on the train and cleanliness. However, the baseline results regarding passenger priorities will still be relevant. Punctuality, capacity, frequency and value for money will still be important in a post-lockdown world. In the long term the looming challenge of climate change means demand for rail travel will return and grow again.

A balanced approach is required of meeting passenger priorities and taking cognisance of changes in travel behaviour for the objective of the timetable being a foundation to encourage a return to public transport to be achieved.

Specific comment on timetable proposals

Detailed comments on each route proposal can be found in Appendix One. However, we would like emphasis on the following:

- Careful consideration is given to maintaining/improving connections at interchange locations.
- The consultation process provides an average of actual loadings on individual routes. By using an average figure consideration must be given to understanding where capacity can be reduced without affecting passengers or stifling potential growth.
- Reinstating the full Glasgow to Edinburgh service through Carstairs at the earliest opportunity that resources allow.
- Delivering passenger priorities with balancing changes in travel behaviour need to be carefully weighed when considering changes to the Perth to Edinburgh services through Fife and how they relate to Fife services as a whole.
- The need to protect both first and last services on each route.