

TWENTY YEARS OF SCOTLAND'S RAILWAY

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Briefing from Transform Scotland

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Key Points.

- Welcomes Scottish Government debate & **agrees with the content of the motion**, including with regards to **devolution of rail powers**.
- Welcomes decisions to **abolish peak hour fares** & to commit to **Fife/Borders rail electrification**.
- Notes **large backlog of ageing infrastructure**, in particular on inter-city and rural routes.
- Notes **poor alignment between broader transport policy and rail policy**.
- Proposes a **new set of priorities for Scotland's Railway**, in order to put passengers first.

1. Scottish rail strategy welcomed, but serious challenges remain.

Scotland's railways have long been a backbone of our communities — linking people to work, education, and leisure while offering a critical environmental alternative to car travel.

The electrification of routes in the Central Belt has been a success story, delivering efficiency, reliability, and environmental benefits. Last week saw two very significant and welcome announcements: firstly, the permanent scrapping of peak hour fares, and, secondly, the commitment to the electrification of the Fife and Borders railways with the procurement of new battery-electric trains.

However, beyond these welcome developments, ScotRail has struggled to recover its passenger base to the pre-Covid position — a 16% drop compared to before the pandemic [1] — and to provide the robust service required for a modern public transport system. Moreover, with services and amenities reduced — including fewer onboard catering options and constrained luggage capacity — the passenger experience, and ultimately patronage, has suffered.

2. Devolved powers required for continued progress to be made.

The success of the devolution of rail powers to Scotland can be measured by the number of railway and station re-openings and progress with electrification, benefiting local communities and reducing Scotland's reliance on fossil fuels. It is essential that these devolved powers are maintained and enhanced. Great British Railways will inherit Network Rail's infrastructure remit and there is a need for this area of the railway to be fully devolved for the railway operating wholly within Scotland. That will allow a single directing mind to have overall control of track and train within Scotland.

3. Investment needed to tackle ageing infrastructure.

ScotRail has one of the oldest train fleets in Britain. On key intercity routes, the reliability of the Inter-City 125 fleet has been a persistent disappointment, leading to overcrowding and service disruptions. These failures ripple across the network, with reallocation of trains from other routes, like Fife, causing further disruption and passenger frustration.

Rural lines face equally significant challenges. Iconic routes like the West Highland and Far North lines remain plagued by outdated infrastructure and limited amenities, despite Scotland's scenic railways holding

immense untapped potential. Scotland is home to rural lines running to its impressive western coastline, which are frequently featured in international travel guides as must-see destinations. Yet, these routes are often served by some of the most basic and outdated trains, lacking the comfort and services that overseas visitors might expect.

On inter-city corridors, the Government's infrastructure spending priorities remain badly misaligned. It has committed to spending in excess of £6 billion on new road capacity on the corridors from Perth and Aberdeen to Inverness. Yet no similar ambition exists for the parallel rail routes. The Highland Main Line has been left with infrastructure that the Victorians would recognise, while an Aberdeen City Deal promise that £200 million would be spent on faster line speeds north of Dundee has been reneged upon.

4. Lack of alignment between broader transport policy and rail policy.

Tackling car dependency is crucial to meeting the Scottish Government's targets. With the railways now government-owned, we would expect to see greater cohesion between improving rail services and facilitating traffic reduction. Scotland will need to shift around 6 billion car passenger kilometres a year to public transport, walking, and cycling by 2030. [2] To meet this goal, it will require more than doubling (110%) of rail passenger kilometres compared to pre-Covid levels. We need to see a coordinated and targeted plan for doubling rail demand and encouraging people to switch from car to train.

Focusing efforts where the biggest impact can be made is critical. The Edinburgh-Glasgow corridor presents a prime opportunity — ample rail capacity and a congested M8 offer fertile ground for interventions like car-parking charges and price incentive schemes to encourage a shift from car to rail. More targeted strategies like this could deliver meaningful growth without entering into the polarising debate about rising transport costs for people living in rural areas.

5. Putting passengers first: a new set of priorities for Scotland's Railway.

If ScotRail is to thrive, its strategy must centre on passenger-centric solutions that address the real needs of passengers while supporting wider government objectives:

- **Simplify fares:** Confusing pricing structures remain a barrier to rail use.
- **Prioritise user experience:** Future train replacements must prioritise passenger comfort, accessibility, onboard catering, and adequate storage for bikes and luggage.
- **Improve service reliability:** Persistent issues with ageing rolling stock and unreliable services must be addressed to rebuild public confidence and accommodate growth.
- **Invest strategically:** Continuous, sustained investment in electrification is non-negotiable if Scotland is serious about ending its reliance on fossil fuels and modernising its transport network.

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[1] See <https://www.transport.gov.scot/media/bclmlyhk/chapter-7-rail-transport-scottish-transport-statistics-2024.pdf>

[2] See <https://foe.scot/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/On-the-Move-Report.pdf>

Scotland's alliance for sustainable transport

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We campaign for walking, cycling and public transport to be the easiest and most affordable options for everyone. Our diverse membership brings together public, private and third sector organisations from across Scotland. We are a registered Scottish charity (SC041516).