

# Rail 2014

*This is a summary of the Friends' response to the ScotRail re-franchising consultation.*

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## **Costs**

*Transport Scotland's Rail 2014 consultation raises issues that will shape the new ScotRail franchise due to start in 2014. An underlying problem for Transport Scotland is that the annual cost of the Scottish rail network and the ScotRail franchise is £725 million in 2011/12, forecast to rise to £794 million by 2013/14. The Scottish Government pays, on average, £9 for each of the 78 million passenger journeys made annually on ScotRail! The Caledonian Sleepers cost £21 million to operate, with a subsidy per passenger journey of around £70.*

*Transport Scotland is under pressure to reduce the cost of the Scottish rail network and train services.*

As world-class tourist routes, the West Highland Lines (WHL) have tremendous potential to attract more visitors to the West Highlands. The focus should be on high quality, efficient train services, and extensive marketing to generate more revenue. Concentrating only on cutting costs will lead to a spiral of decline.

## **Train Services**

*The consultation suggests that more standing capacity, and greater use of interchanges, where passengers would have to change trains, could cut costs.*

Under normal circumstances, passengers should not have to stand on WHL trains, given the long journey times and high profile tourist status as the UK's prime tourist line. Direct trains from Glasgow to Oban, Fort William and Mallaig must be retained, as many WHL passengers have luggage. There may, however, be a case for introducing connections at Crianlarich to add extra services to the timetable (for instance an Oban connection from the Fort William sleeper).

The performance regime should be modified to recognise the importance of maintaining advertised connections, wherever practical, between rail, ferry and bus at interchange stations like Oban, Mallaig and Fort William.

WHL train frequency is low compared with other Scottish rural lines. Transport Scotland should specify a higher frequency of at least 4 trains per day, with a minimum gap of 4 hours between trains. Transport Scotland should also consider an innovation fund to encourage trials of additional services to test the market. If successful, these could be incorporated into the franchise.

The consultation's view that journey times are not so important on rural lines is unacceptable, considering the current un-competitiveness of WHL journey times compared with road travel.

## **Stations**

*Of the 350 stations in Scotland, the consultation mentions that 37 have fewer than 2000 entries/exits per year (equivalent to 20 return passengers per week). These stations have annual leasing costs of £650,000. On the WHL, Ardlui (1970 entries/exits per year), Beasdale (272), Falls of Cruachan (204), Loch Eil Outward Bound (548), and Locheilside (268) fall into this category.*

These places are in remote countryside, with poor alternative public transport. It may be possible to reduce the cost of maintaining some of these stations if a derogation from national engineering standards can be obtained for quiet stations on rural Scottish lines, accompanied by installing a selective door opening system on trains. This is consistent with cost savings recommended in the McNulty report and should be considered before any station closures are suggested.

### **Fares**

*To reduce the cost of supporting rail services, the consultation suggests some fares could be regulated at up to RPI+3%, while others could be deregulated and set commercially by the franchisee.*

WHL trains are rather slow, so increasing fares above inflation is likely to reduce ridership and overall yield. It is important that the Highland Railcard scheme, offering local people a 50% discount, should become a franchise commitment, as should Club 55. The franchisee should have freedom to give special offers to encourage growth of optional leisure travel, boosting tourism in the West Highlands.

### **Trains**

The Class 156s used on the WHL have draughty windows and doors, inadequate heating, and only one non-retention toilet per 2-car unit with 138 seats. These are unsatisfactory for the long distance WHL journeys, and pollute the tracks. New trains designed for WHL could be ideal. But pressure to reduce train leasing costs makes refurbished Class 158 trains (as used on the Far North line) the most likely future option (Class 170 trains are believed to be too heavy to give acceptable performance on the WHL). Latest statistics show that mechanical reliability of ScotRail trains compares poorly with those of other train operating companies. This needs to be addressed in the new franchise.

A ban on alcohol on trains is one controversial suggestion in the consultation. In most circumstances, this would be an unpopular and unnecessary measure. Moreover, the effect of such a ban on tourist expectations and the viability of the catering trolley services would have to be carefully assessed.

### **Caledonian Sleeper**

The recent announcement of over £100 million of capital funding from the Holyrood and Westminster Governments for Caledonian Sleeper coaches is excellent news. This should allow new sleeping cars, with en-suite cabins at least in First Class, and coaches with reclining seats, to be provided. However, the operation of the West Highland sleeper will need to be revised to reduce the high operating costs. The consultation suggests offering the Caledonian Sleepers as a separate franchise. Another possibility would be to operate the WHL sleeper as a portion of the Glasgow sleeper, attaching/detaching in Glasgow Central. This could give flexibility to expand capacity to Fort William in mid-summer, when demand for business travel to Glasgow is lower.

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