



Unite response to the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee call for written evidence on Scotland's railways since Public Ownership

Unite the Union Scotland represents around 152,000 working people and their families throughout Scotland. Unite is the UK's largest trade union with 1.4 million members in a range of industries including transport, construction, financial services, manufacturing, print and media, the voluntary and non-profit sectors, local government and the NHS.

Scotrail in public hands

The commitment from the First Minister Humza Yousaf to categorically commit to keep Scotrail and the Sleeper Service in public ownership is a very important step in achieving an accessible and affordable train service for the people of Scotland and this decision was welcomed by Unite. Nevertheless Unite would wish to highlight some areas of concern that we would wish the Scottish Government to consider.

Skills

Scotrail must continue to recruit and invest in apprenticeships and to provide support to increase and update the skills of the workforce. Reskilling and retraining programmes are essential to ensure the workforce have the skills and competence to carry out the role now and in the future.

It is no coincidence that we are seeing a 'cliff-edge' of skills within the rail service particularly within Engineering. There is a clear and present danger that Scotland will not be able to service and maintain trains within Scotland for the current Scotrail fleet, let alone the new fleet of trains scheduled for 2028. The projected demographic profiling of the workforce in Engineering is that 33 per cent of a *500 strong Engineering Workforce* will approach normal retirement age within the next 5 years. This coupled with a current intake of only 8 apprentice (1.6 per cent) of the workforce on a 4-year apprenticeship programme, clearly demonstrates a huge void in skills, knowledge, and experience in the next 5 years.

We need action now to address this. Unite is calling for a massive in-house upskilling programme to address this skill cliff edge. There needs to be a coherent robust upskilling plan that incorporates the following:

- 1. Diversification of Apprenticeships to cover both Electrical & Mechanical disciplines.*

2. *Significant Increase in Modern Apprenticeship numbers, to correlate with the potential retirement numbers.*
3. *Reintroduction of the Unite/Scotrail Adult/Accelerated Apprenticeship model to upskilling B Grades to A Grades.*
4. *Skilled to Technical Progression Path Upskilling Programme.*

Unite requires a cast iron commitment from the Scottish Government that the repair overhaul and Maintenance of the Scotrail fleet of trains existing and New Fleet proposed will be maintained inhouse within Scotrail and not subcontracted to 3rd party employer either in Scotland or elsewhere.

During pay talks there was a collective recognition that there will be inevitable engineering skills gap created by the demographic changes in the ScotRail workforce over the coming years. We recognise that some progress has been made on backfilling vacancies and that there has been partial progress on increasing the number of entrants to the traditional apprenticeship scheme, particularly on moving from 8 apprentices to potentially 24 for 2024. However more needs to be done by Scotrail to commit to the re-introduction of an accelerated (adult) apprenticeship scheme as there has been no progress made on this.

Investment

Unite also believes that there requires to be considerable and ongoing investment in the rail system to ensure it is part of a sustainable and successful transport network which will also contribute to our climate change ambitions. Unite believes that the investment that is required should be more in line with the funding provided for the road network given the trains credentials as more environmentally sustainable.

As a comparator, the cost of the Aberdeen periphery ring road was around £1 billion; ¹ and the Queensferry crossing final costs are estimated to be £1.3 billion² whereas the rail has received a fraction of these figures despite running a network covering the whole of Scotland. This shows the glaring lack of funding of the rail network under privatisation, with profits being distributed to shareholders and not into improving the network, improving rolling stock, delivering affordable fares, or into workers pay, terms and conditions or skills development, as recent industrial disputes have highlighted.

The rail network however does not stand alone in Scotland's transport infrastructure and inter-connectivity must be the next important phase in building a successful transport system. As the First Minister has indicated, we would all want to see a safe, reliable, affordable and accessible public transport system for Scotland and trains will be vital in that mix, as are ferries and buses. For that reason Unite has also called for public ownership of the bus network. The combination of different modes of transport under public ownership, providing an integrated system that works for the people of Scotland is, Unite believes, the best outcome for the travelling public and Scotland's economy.

¹ <https://www.insider.co.uk/news/aberdeen-bypass-opening-costs-route-13690486>

² <https://www.heraldscotland.com/opinion/18230861.decision-go-new-forth-bridge-flawed/>

At present we look on with envy at some of our closest neighbours in Europe's largest cities and see publicly owned, accessible, affordable, inter-connected trains with high and consistent passenger numbers. We must learn from these successes and rather than cutting the workforce, or reducing investment, the Scottish Government through Scotrail, must work to deliver a truly world-beating rail network that invests in people and infrastructure.

Unite is optimistic that with decent levels of investment through public ownership of transport, and by improving the rail infrastructure, cutting ticket prices, increasing services, integrating the service with other modes of transport and importantly, investing in the workforce, Scotland will be able to deliver a quality travel experience that could potentially be the envy of other countries.

Anti-social behaviour

The increase in anti-social behaviour, physical and verbal assault, as well as incidents of sexual harassment has brought attention to the cuts in staff which it could be argued, has perpetuated such behaviours. This highlights the urgent need to increase onboard staff on trains, as well as ensuring sufficient staffing of ticket offices in order that those that seek to cause chaos or distress to others may think twice about doing so when there is a visible presence.

Climate change targets

Trains are one of the most environmentally sustainable modes of transport available and should receive investment that reflects that. Indeed, if we don't invest in trains Scotland will fail to meet the targets set of a reduction in carbon emissions of 75 per cent reduction by 2030, and a 90 per cent reduction by 2040. A report published in by Common Weal titled: *A public future for Scotland's Railways*³ stated that:

With regards to the environment, the most effective means of securing a reduction in emissions from the transport sector – now the single largest source of greenhouse gas emissions in Scotland – would be to achieve a modal shift in transport usage away from the roads and towards the railways. Given that rail travel is over twice as carbon efficient as travel by car, every 1% of current car passenger kilometres shifted onto the railways could be expected to reduce emissions by around 22KtCO₂e. In addition, each tonne of freight transported by rail produces 76% less CO₂ emissions than the equivalent HGV journey, while further electrification of Scotland's railways would increase the efficiency of v both passenger and freight transport even more.

Peak Fares Pilot

Public ownership enabled the Scottish Government to introduce a pilot scheme which scrapped peak fares and this was warmly welcomed by Unite and other trade unions as well as the travelling public. Anecdotal evidence would suggest that the scrapping of peak fares during the pilot has been a success. The pilot may also have contributed to

³ <https://commonweal.scot/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/A-Public-Future-for-Scotlands-Railways.pdf>

reducing the number of cars on the road as people shift from car to rail even in the short term, to benefit from lower fares, contributing in some way to lowering carbon emissions and ultimately in helping Scotland in some way to achieve its climate goals.

It is clear that passenger numbers are increasing as people return to rail as a mode of transportation following the fall-off in passenger numbers since Covid. Given this increase, Unite believes that the financial costs of running the pilot have provided value for money and we are therefore disappointed and surprised that the Scottish Government has yet to make peak fares a thing of the past.

Unite would urge the Scottish Government to scrap off peak fares permanently which would encourage more people to choose train travel as an affordable option, saving them money at a time when the cost of living continues to rise; helping the economy through increasing opportunities for consumer spending and also in contributing to lowering carbon emissions as car use falls.

For more information please contact [REDACTED] or [REDACTED]