

THE FRIENDS OF THE FAR NORTH LINE



Cairdean Na Loine Tuath
*the campaign group for rail north of
Inverness - lobbying for improved
services for the local user, tourist
and freight operator*

6 December 2018

In October it became clear that eight important train connections would be broken at Inverness in the imminent December 2018 - May 2019 timetable. These would have caused journeys to be extended by several hours, or in some cases an overnight stay to be required - a situation likely to exist for at least six months.

With some very rapid intervention by ScotRail and co-operation from Network Rail, most of these were fixed at the end of November. However, damage had already been done because up to that point advance ticket purchases would have been impossible where broken connections existed.

Even though in some cases passengers might still have been able to make the connections, if the arrival were punctual, the ticket issuing system would not allow the purchase of through tickets with a connection of under five minutes.

Apparently there was also an unusual delay in ScotRail being informed about these. The Friends of the Far North Line (FoFNL) also understands that, because of the timetabling catastrophes caused by the DfT earlier this year, Network Rail's timetablers in Milton Keynes have become extremely risk-averse and were initially unwilling to consider any changes before the May 2019 timetable. Had a separate company been running Scotland's rail infrastructure and timetabling none of this would have happened.

This kind of difficulty is unacceptable. The Scottish timetable should be generated and maintained in Scotland with co-ordination between Scotland and England achieved as it is between all neighbouring countries which operate cross-border services.

FoFNL believes that because the rail network and passenger services in Scotland are underwritten by the Scottish Government, to whom the operators are answerable, it is paradoxical that Network Rail alone should still be a single GB body, under the control of the DfT which has no other input into Scottish railways.

The Scottish railway operation is largely self-contained, with comparatively few services crossing the border. The necessary co-ordination in infrastructure matters between a 'Network Rail Scotland' and a 'Network Rail England & Wales' would be simple to organise, especially as rail standards would be identical.

In a survey carried out for an independent report commissioned by ScotRail franchise holder, Abellio entitled "Is Scotland On The Right Track?" which was published on 13 August 2018, it was found that "More than six in ten Scots believe that all decisions about the railways in Scotland should be taken by organisations overseen by the Scottish Government, while a further 30 per cent want a combination of UK and Scottish Government oversight. Among the most frequent passengers, 93 per cent want either exclusively Scottish Government oversight (73 per cent) or UK and Scottish Government oversight (21 per cent). Arguably, the results are unsurprising given the natural preference towards devolution in wider public life in Scotland."

The UK Government is unwilling to consider any change to the current arrangement so FoFNL would like to see cross-party support in Holyrood to put more pressure on the UK Government to change its mind. In the current political situation it is particularly important for non-SNP members to voice their support as this is not a 'political' question.

Ian Budd - Convener, on behalf of the Committee of Friends of the Far North Line