

Ministerial Statement – Rail Services

Presiding Officer, I am grateful to Parliament for the opportunity to make a statement about our railway network.

Let me be quite clear - everyone rightly expects a railway network that operates effectively. So when things go wrong I fully understand the dissatisfaction of passengers and the inconvenience that is caused.

Before I set out information on the performance of our railways, the actions we are taking and the long term transformation we have planned, let me say, firstly, to any passenger who has a bad experience on our railways, that I am sorry, and that this government is committed to improving the service you receive.

There will always be incidents beyond our control on any transport system that interrupt service. In respect of last Thursday's failure at Edinburgh Waverley I add my regret to that expressed by the First Minister. The breakdown happened at the worst place on the network, at the worst time and had a massive effect.

Whilst no Minister in any government can guarantee major failures won't happen, I can advise that ScotRail has learned lessons to ensure that they are better prepared for contingencies and communication with passengers when such incidents do take place.

Indeed, today, we have seen a much more responsive reaction by ScotRail to the incident which regrettably affected large numbers of commuters in the Glasgow area.

Let me be clear, this government expects the highest possible standards of our rail industry and to achieve that we have set some of the toughest targets of any franchise in the UK.

The franchise agreement asks for 91 of every 100 trains to arrive at their destination within the recognised industry punctuality measure.

Now I have no intention of underplaying issues for passengers or the effect that a slide in service quality can have on the journeys of individuals but it is important to recognise that in a number of areas that target is being met.

On the Glasgow-Dunblane line 93% of services meet that target, for Ayrshire services that is 93.8 and for Paisley Canal that figure is 97%.

Overall performance for the last year has been 89.8% - which is better than the figure we inherited in 2007, despite the network being far busier today with a 33% increase in passengers, 130 additional daily services and a higher than current GB average of 87%.

When performance is being measured across the network as a whole it is currently not where we want it to be. At the same time I know that increases in passenger numbers and pressure on services also means the experience for many passengers is not what they want it to be either.

To respond to those concerns I instructed ScotRail on 23 August to develop a Performance Improvement Plan and to deliver improvements to the customer experience.

That plan was published on 20 October. And the ORR, the independent regulator, has confirmed that it is robust, challenging but deliverable. There are some 250 individual actions within the Plan and work is well under way to deliver them.

Passengers want to see action now to strengthen the reliability of the rail infrastructure across the network: £16m of investment has been brought forward over and above that planned already to upgrade key junctions, track and signalling equipment.

This week, action is taking place to renew points at Cowlairs, improve circuits in Dunblane, and improve the reliability of our Class 334 fleet serving North Lanarkshire, Dunbartonshire and West Lothian.

Action is taking place to fit an improved radiator design to tackle the cooling issues experienced by services to the Borders and £14m is being spent on improving the overall reliability of the ScotRail fleet.

In respect of operations, revised procedures are in place at major stations to focus on prompt departures and on managing known pinch-points on our network. A skip stop protocol has been introduced to protect peak-time commuters and reduce the instances of stops being missed.

I know overcrowding is frustrating for passengers when it happens. I can confirm that we are finalising details to provide more carriages from mid-December on both the morning and evening key peak time service on the Borders Railway.

And at the same time we will also introduce an early morning Perth to Inverness commuter service arriving just after 8 am. Southbound, a new direct service will depart Inverness for Edinburgh arriving before 0930 and, with a change, a broadly similar time at Glasgow. These services will provide increased daily travel opportunities between north and central Scotland.

Presiding Officer, I am know the work that is required and the service that is to be delivered.

I have taken action and a plan is now in place. This government has a track record of delivering for our railways and it is my firm intention that we will continue to do so.

We are investing £5bn up to 2019 to transform the railway with huge increases in carriages, seats and services.

Since 2007 140 extra carriages have been introduced to the ScotRail fleet.

An extra 200 carriages will follow in the next 30 months: That means 50% more carriages than in 2007.

We are investing twice as much per capita as the UK Government in the existing network.

Our seven cities will be linked by higher speed trains with rolling stock more in keeping with an inter-city experience providing the latest standard of comfort, accessibility and catering provision plus 40% more seats.

70 new electric trains will be delivered in the central belt, providing commuters with up to 40% of extra seats at peak times on the main Edinburgh –Glasgow route.

And we're not forgetting the existing fleet. 90% of our current fleet will be totally refurbished to improve performance and reliability with better on board facilities such as Wi-Fi, power sockets, new lighting and new seats.

We're also moving with the times and expanding electronic payments for travel. Already smart-cards can be used for season ticket journeys across the rail network.

Fare increases are at their lowest level since the devolution of rail in 2005. Increases in Peak fares are capped at inflation and £5 inter-city fares have been introduced.

And all of these initiatives, and more, are as a direct consequence of our passenger-focussed franchise specification.

And to support these service improvements we are in the midst of one of the most significant transformations to our railway infrastructure in recent memory.

I'm only going back four years and yet in that period we delivered -

- The award winning Paisley Canal electrification project in 2012;
- The transformation of Haymarket Station in 2013;
- The electrification of the Glasgow to Cumbernauld line and the Whifflet lines in 2014;

- The opening of the Borders Railway last year;
- The re-modelling of Queen Street Tunnel to prepare for electrification;
- The start of advance works for the improvements to the Aberdeen to Inverness line;
- In partnership with the local authority, the redevelopment of Dundee station is scheduled for completion during December 2017;
- Ongoing work on the electrification between Edinburgh and Glasgow via Falkirk;
- Commencement of advance works for the rolling programme of electrification on the Shotts line and to Stirling;

In addition

- Edinburgh Gateway will shortly open;
- we've committed funds for stations at Robroyston, East Linton and Reston;
- and increased the level of central funding for the new Kintore station.

And we're committed to completing these projects - unlike the deferrals and cancellations south of the border, where large cost over-runs have triggered an aggressive programme of asset sales. We are not in that position.

Our investment in infrastructure signals our confidence in Scotland's railway.

But it also means that there is a substantial challenge to operate an effective service and introduce new trains and enhance the passenger experience whilst making these major infrastructural improvements.

Recognising that challenge we encouraged ScotRail and Network Rail to form an Alliance to cement their operational relationship.

We have seen the benefits that this approach can provide, particularly through the effective communication and management of the improvement works at Winchburgh and at the Queen Street tunnel.

But clearly this Alliance could do more. Network Rail is a body whose activities in Scotland are fully funded by the Scottish Government. Yet it's formal accountability remains to UK Government.

To fully realise the potential of the Alliance and enable it to deliver the modern railway that passengers expect we need further devolution of rail powers and responsibilities. I call on all parties in this chamber to support me in that objective.

Presiding Officer, we signed a ten year contract for the provision of passenger rail services with Abellio and we set tough targets on behalf of Scotland's passengers.

It is the duty and responsibility of Abellio to fulfil their obligation under the contract. It is my job to hold them to account, and I will personally be closely monitoring Abellio and their progress on the improvement plan until performance returns to acceptable contractual standards.

At the same time we will also act on the additional powers given to this Parliament in the Scotland Act 2016. This removes the prohibition on public sector bodies to bid for future Scottish rail franchises. But it does not remove the need for competition. Any public sector bid would need to be tested in competition - so we can pick the best option for Scotland's passengers in an objective manner.

So we will use the powers we do have and follow through our manifesto commitment to take steps for a level playing field in franchise competitions.

To take this forward I have written to trades unions, party Transport spokespersons, regional transport partnerships and Transport Focus to invite all parties to an initial, round-table meeting next week at which I will set out our approach, legal powers and potential options.

Presiding Officer, these have been testing times – for passengers particularly. But there is a Performance Improvement Plan in place with concrete actions being taken here and now. Abellio and the government are committed to ensuring the success of the ScotRail franchise.

And as I've briefly highlighted there is a broader backdrop with exciting service propositions, more and new rolling stock and significant infrastructure improvements that will benefit our growing numbers of rail passengers.

I am acutely aware that we are about to enter winter with all the attendant challenges that that brings. There will be times when winter weather will mean passengers will face disruption. However, I wish to conclude by stressing that I am personally determined to achieve the best outcome for passengers.

And in that respect I hope the Chamber will join me in supporting the efforts and actions of the management and staff of ScotRail in delivering their improvement plans and making a resounding success of our franchise. A franchise which delivers for Scotland.