



Towards a Transport Strategy for Scotland  
Scottish Executive Consultation on Rail Priorities  
NESTRANS' Response

## **INTRODUCTION**

NESTRANS is the voluntary regional transport partnership for north east Scotland. It comprises Aberdeenshire Council, Aberdeen City Council, Scottish Enterprise Grampian and Aberdeen and Grampian Chamber of Commerce.

NESTRANS was formed in 2001 to bring together public and private sectors in the region to develop and implement a regional transport strategy. The resulting strategy - the Modern Transport System - takes an integrated approach to improving accessibility to and within the region and tackling congestion in Aberdeen. It consists of 14 strands, three of which focus on rail.

NESTRANS welcomes the development of a National Transport Strategy for Scotland, and its 'daughter' rail and freight strategies. As a member of the Rail Stakeholders Forum and attendee at the Freight consultation event in August, NESTRANS has taken these opportunities to make constructive contributions to the strategy development process. This response has been informed by discussion among both officers and Board members and was formally agreed by the NESTRANS Board on 28 November 2005.

## **THE ROLE OF RAIL**

Rail is a crucial element of the transport system in Scotland and rest of Britain. It is a highly efficient, fast and generally reliable mode of transport, unaffected by road congestion. It provides vital connections for commuters, business and leisure travellers and freight customers, delivering economic, social and environmental benefits. The role of rail needs to be considered within both an integrated transport strategy and the wider objectives for delivering sustainable economic growth and meeting Government targets on climate change and road traffic.

The commitment of the Scottish Executive to reviving the railways in Scotland is strongly supported. However the overall tone of this consultation document suggests a lack of aspiration for continuing to improve and expand rail. NESTRANS believes there is much more to do to fully realise the contribution that rail can make to the future development of Scotland. The economic, social and environmental arguments for reinstating railways in central Scotland and the Scottish Borders have been well made - and they are just as relevant to other parts of the country which are currently under-served by the rail network. It is essential that the National Rail and Transport Strategies recognise the importance of continued investment in developing and expanding rail in Scotland.

## **NESTRANS' STRATEGIC RAIL PRIORITIES**

The north east of Scotland is a major driver of the Scottish economy and the region's geographical position in relation to the rest of Scotland and the UK makes transport a crucial factor in its continuing economic success. The nature of the rail network in north east Scotland means that it serves a variety of purposes. Passenger services, in particular our links to Edinburgh, Glasgow, London and Inverness, are vital to the economy and are well-

used by business and leisure travellers. However these services also provide popular commuter services, as dedicated local services do not currently exist. The sleeper service provides an economically important link with London and is an attractive, and more environmentally sustainable, alternative to air travel. Rail freight, which is on an upward trend, reduces lorry traffic and has both economic and environmental benefits.

The following strategic priorities arise from NESTRANS' Modern Transport System strategy:

- ❖ Improved journey times and quality of rail service to Edinburgh, Glasgow and London.
- ❖ Increased capacity on busy services to and from Edinburgh and Glasgow.
- ❖ Enhanced frequency on services between Aberdeen and stations in the NESTRANS area.
- ❖ Introduction of cross-city rail services, better connecting the region.
- ❖ New or re-opened stations to meet commuter and other demands.
- ❖ Faster, more frequent services between Aberdeen and Inverness.
- ❖ Increased rail freight through gauge enhancement and the development of modern inter-modal facilities.
- ❖ Park and ride at stations.
- ❖ Integrated ticketing initiatives.
- ❖ Improved passenger information, security and accessibility for disabled people at all stations.

## **NESTRANS' RAIL PROJECTS**

Over the past few years, with the assistance of the Scottish Executive, NESTRANS has progressed work on the three rail strands of the Modern Transport System strategy listed below. This strategy has a time horizon of 2011 and the projects listed below were prioritised for delivery within this time period. It should be noted however that aspirations exist within the north east for further expansion of the rail network in the future. The forthcoming statutory Regional Transport Strategy will identify priority rail projects for the north east beyond 2011.

### **Aberdeen Crossrail**

Crossrail aims to provide a frequent, cross-city rail service between Inverurie, Aberdeen and Stonehaven, coupled with new stations. A STAG appraisal of the project was completed in June 2005, NESTRANS was awarded £400,000 from the Executive to develop the project to Network Rail Level 4 and undertake a STAG 2 appraisal.

NESTRANS propose a three-phase approach to delivering Crossrail. The first and second phases are based on extending existing services from the south to Inverurie and extending trains from Inverness to Stonehaven, to ultimately achieve a 30-minute frequency. This would also facilitate the re-opening of a station at Kintore, where significant residential development is underway. The longer-term ambition is for a quarter-hourly local service between Inverurie – Aberdeen – Stonehaven, provided by over-laying a dedicated half-hourly service on the above, and with a minimum of 3 new stations in the north and south of the City of Aberdeen and at Newtonhill.

### **Strategic Rail**

NESTRANS has worked with public and private sector partners to press for improved services between Aberdeen and Edinburgh, Glasgow and London. In north east Scotland a joint Rail Transport Working Party has been in existence since the early 1990s facilitating

communication between the rail industry and local authority interests, including Aberdeen City Council, Aberdeenshire Council and the Moray Council.

NESTRANS has worked with HITRANS and the Scottish Executive to develop an Outline Business Case for improvements to the regularity and speed of the Inverness and Aberdeen service. These were originally proposed by the Strategic Rail Authority under their Incremental Output Statement programme. Services on this line carry both inter-city and commuter passengers, but due to the line being single track with very limited passing loops, services currently operate only every 2-hours, with a journey time that is uncompetitive with the road. The Outline Business Case has recently been finalised and will feed into the development work on Aberdeen Crossrail.

Aberdeenshire Council is also taking forward work to enable the re-opening of a station at Laurencekirk. This follows an initial STAG 1 appraisal, commissioned by the previous ScotRail franchisee, and a STAG 2 appraisal funded by the Scottish Executive and Aberdeenshire Council, which confirmed a positive business case for station re-opening. The Scottish Executive and Aberdeenshire Council are currently funding a Network Rail Level 4 study, which is expected to be completed in early 2006.

## **Rail Freight**

NESTRANS is keen to see a greater role for rail freight in the north east. The potential for further development of rail freight has however been limited by gauge clearance on the main line serving the north east. NESTRANS supports and contributes to the work of the North East Scotland Rail Freight Development Group (NESRFDG), which developed proposals for gauge enhancement on the line between Mossend and Elgin, via Aberdeen. NESTRANS welcomes the commitment by the Transport Minister on 3 October 2005 that the Scottish Executive would fund and implement this £4 million project, which is expected to be complete by summer 2007.

Gauge enhancement will enable a larger, standard (9'6") containers to be transported from the north east to the south of England and on to continental Europe. This will make rail freight a more attractive and flexible option for businesses and will help the competitiveness of firms based or doing business in the north east of Scotland. NESTRANS is also supporting the work of the NESRFDG to promote the new opportunities which will become available and the economic and environmental benefits of rail freight.

## **NESTRANS' RESPONSE TO DETAILED CONSULTATION QUESTIONS**

### **Question 1**

- a) Following the delivery of the current major projects, should we change the focus of investment in the railways to concentrate on securing the benefits from the existing network, or are there further new benefits that rail could achieve?**

While NESTRANS welcomes the Scottish Executive's commitment to expanding the rail network, it is notable that the current programme is focused primarily on central Scotland and the Scottish Borders. NESTRANS is concerned at the implication in this question that the current major rail projects reflect the entirety of Scotland's rail needs. They represent a significant step forward, but there is much more to do.

As is noted above, NESTRANS has led the development of rail enhancement projects in north east Scotland in recent years, and in the case of the Aberdeen-Inverness IOS, has worked in partnership with HITRANS to take this forward. NESTRANS welcomes the fact that Aberdeen Crossrail was included as one of the "top ten" rail projects in the 2002

Transport Delivery Report (*Scotland's Transport, Delivering Improvements*), and looks forward to its future implementation following completion of the necessary appraisal work.

Increasing demand for rail travel, from both passengers and freight, and ageing infrastructure means that there will still be a need for major investment in new infrastructure and expansion of the rail network across Scotland in future years. Therefore to suggest that the focus of future funding should be to "consolidate the benefits of investment" is not only premature, but would also perpetuate the focus of expenditure in central Scotland where most current investment is taking place. This would be seriously damaging to the economy of the north east and Scotland as a whole.

**b) Would you like to see current rail resources used in different ways? Please be specific.**

Within the current programme of rail projects, there is no significant investment being made in improving longer distance services, in particular on the main lines from Edinburgh and Glasgow to Aberdeen and Inverness, as well as between the two northern cities.

NESTRANS would like to see more investment prioritised in improving journey times, capacity and reliability on these routes – to the benefit of both passenger and freight services. The Scottish Executive's new responsibilities for commissioning work from Network Rail provides a clear opportunity to address these issues, for instance through investment in more modern signalling, passing loops and the elimination of bottlenecks. Through the Scottish Passenger Rail Franchise, NESTRANS would like to see increased capacity provided on services which are currently operating close to, or in excess of, capacity at certain times.

**Question 2**

**a) Are there measures that could be taken to attract new customers to rail, and to encourage more people to use the train instead of the car?**

Yes. More could be done in terms of marketing and incentives to switch from the car to the train. However, provision of a consistent quality service, with clean, comfortable trains that are frequent and reliable is important in encouraging people to choose the train and use it again. Better integration with other transport modes, such as through park and ride, is also an important factor.

Travel awareness initiatives also have a role to play in encouraging more people to use rail. NESTRANS is implementing its own programme of travel awareness projects, which encourages people to think about changing their travel behaviour. Pricing strategy is also important. There are currently anomalies within the fares structure, which can act as a disincentive to choosing rail. There needs to be a range of ticketing options which meet the needs of different travellers.

**b) Is reliability and punctuality of service still top priority for passengers? If not, what do you consider is the top priority?**

Reliability and punctuality are important elements of the overall service quality. However frequency of service, journey time and train comfort and cleanliness are also elements that are highly valued by passengers. Different customers are likely to value some of these elements more highly than others. For instance, while punctuality may be more important for commuters, longer distance travellers may regard comfort and cleanliness of the train and overall journey times as most important. Pricing is also important for all types of passenger and any changes to the regulated fares system requires to be considered in the context of potential impacts on modal choice.

With First ScotRail services, capacity and availability of seats is becoming an increasing problem on growth routes, particularly out of Edinburgh and Glasgow at peak times. There are currently deficiencies in the overall quality of service, encompassing comfort, cleanliness, catering, capacity and passenger information on many trains serving the north east.

NESTRANS would like to see market research undertaken on priorities for business, commuter and leisure passengers, travelling to, from and within the north east, and identification of barriers to rail use. This would identify passengers' priorities and should guide actions for improvement on the part of the rail operators, most notably First ScotRail.

**c) What is the top priority for freight customers? Are reliability of access to the network and the timeliness of services also the top priority for freight customers?**

From our experience working with freight operating companies through the North East Scotland Rail Freight Development Group, we know that the availability of freight paths and reliability are important in providing an effective service for their customers. The availability of well-located, modern road to rail transfer facilities is also essential to encouraging the development of rail freight and ensuring it provides an efficient service. The gauge enhancement from Mossend – Elgin, to be delivered by the Executive, is crucial to enabling a step-change in transfer of freight from road to rail and expanding inter-modal freight movement. Pro-active marketing and market responsiveness by rail freight companies should complement this. The Executive should engage with rail freight providers to encourage a more pro-active approach to growing the rail freight product and market.

**d) For cross border passenger services, should the priority be a quick journey to the final destination (e.g. London, Birmingham, and Manchester) or the ability to stop at intermediate stations?**

While journey times between Scotland and the major centres referred to above are important factors, it is also worth noting that intermediate stations in England are also significant destinations for people travelling to and from Scotland. A balance therefore needs to be struck.

In north east Scotland, there are three GNER services in each direction per day, providing an important link to London. In addition, Virgin operates a daily service to Birmingham. These services are highly valued by both business and leisure passengers in the region and NESTRANS is keen to see further development of cross-Border services and reductions in journey times, particularly to London. Improving journey times needs to include focus on the journey time north of Edinburgh. Recent and further planned reductions in journey times between Edinburgh and the south are fully supported but the lack of any such improvements between Aberdeen and Edinburgh means that the north east is becoming relatively more peripheral, with potential impacts on the regional economy, in terms of business and tourism. Faster journey times south would better enable rail to compete with air travel, which imposes much higher environmental costs.

It should however be noted that cross-Border services have an important place in the timetable, with the current stopping patterns providing services that are used for commuter and inter-city travel. For instance, all cross-Border services call at Stonehaven, which has a park and ride facility and acts as a gateway station to the wider Aberdeenshire area. This calling point plays an important role in assisting tourism and social inclusion and should be preserved.

**e) If reliability and punctuality of services is the top priority for customers, should we generally only allow changes to the network that provide a net benefit to customers in terms of better reliability and punctuality?**

No. It is important to consider other factors as well, such as frequency of service and the economic, environmental and social benefits of current stopping patterns. It is also important to consider that many services in the Scottish rail network, including most services in the north east, provide for a combination of inter-city, regional and local journeys.

**f) Are there opportunities for a different, and more appropriate, approach to fares setting in particular areas of Scotland or for particular rail routes, or for particular types of passenger?**

Yes. It is certainly worth exploring ways in which the fare structure can be used to attract more people to use the railway, in particular increasing passenger numbers on less-busy services and offering more incentives for leisure passengers. As indicated in 2(a) above, existing anomalies in the fares structure and differential local availability of “special fares” can act as a disincentive to choosing rail in preference to the car for local and longer distance travel and can potentially discriminate in terms of social inclusion.

However we would not support any attempts to reduce demand through the price mechanism by fare increases, for example on peak-time trains. This would run counter to the economic, social and environmental objectives of increasing rail use. Pricing of rail services should aim to encourage more people to use the train. In terms of national transport and sustainability objectives, it is perverse that differential pricing can often be used to constrain peak demand for one of the most sustainable modes of transport

### **Question 3**

**a) How should we prioritise services on different routes, where the fixed network is close to capacity and choices have to be made?**

It is important that the network is used efficiently and effectively, ensuring that the needs of different rail users are met. The notion that the network is “fixed” gives rise to concerns that the Executive does not envisage future development of the rail network, to include new or re-opened links and significant increases in network capacity beyond those projects which are already committed, mostly in the central belt of Scotland.

The forthcoming Regional Transport Strategy for north east Scotland is likely to examine the potential for extending the role of heavy rail and other fixed rail mass transit in north east Scotland. This would include the potential, in the longer term, for re-opening former lines such as the Buchan line to Ellon and Peterhead and introducing further commuter stations in Aberdeen, in support of regional and national transport and sustainability objectives. The national rail and wider transport strategies should similarly include scope for consideration of opportunities for aspirational development of the rail network and capacity.

Consideration also needs to be given to whether the current rail infrastructure can deliver the level of flexibility required to enable the network to be used most efficiently. Investment may be required on upgraded signalling or passing loops to achieve this. This would, for instance, enable a late-running inter-city train to take priority over a local stopping train, to avoid adding further to its delay (a particular issue for services through Fife). Where infrastructure is operating consistently close to capacity, then serious consideration needs to be given to its expansion.

It is also important that the railway industry is able to work together in a co-ordinated fashion, with sufficient operational flexibility, to ensure that the network is used most efficiently.

However it is not for NESTRANS to seek to prioritise the 'running order' of trains on particular routes.

**b) Should the general presumption for Scotland as a whole be to prioritise according to current and anticipated demand for the service, i.e. what will give the maximum benefit to the economy?**

No. Aside from the difficulties associated with accurately judging which service will give the maximum benefit to the economy, this approach also neglects the important social and environmental benefits of rail. It is also difficult to see such a presumption working in an operational sense.

**c) Do you have specific regional priorities that might differ from this? For example, are there particular routes or services in your region where you believe the predominant role should be to meet social inclusion or environmental objectives, rather than to grow the economy?**

Rail services in the north east of Scotland perform a variety of roles. There is no segregation between 'inter-city' and 'commuter' as the vast majority of services perform both these roles. Therefore the issue of giving precedence to one type of passenger service over another does not apply. The nature of rail services in the north east means that all services tend to serve economic, social and environmental objectives. NESTRANS' approach to incremental development of existing rail priority projects, such as Aberdeen Crossrail linked with enhancement to the Aberdeen – Inverness service, reflects the multiple role which services fulfil for travel to/from and within the region.

**d) Do you consider that the priorities for specific routes should vary at different times of the day or during different seasons?**

This would have to be considered on a case by case basis.

**e) Would the increase in passenger kilometres and the volume of freight being carried be an appropriate proxy measure for the benefit to the economy, or are there better measures?**

These sound reasonable measures. However it is important to ensure that large numbers of passengers travelling short distances (ie. Most commuters) are fully taken account of. In the case of rail freight, the number of lorry miles removed from the roads indicates an economic benefit, in terms of less congestion and wear and tear on roads, as well as an environmental benefit. These measures do not, however, necessarily perform so well in capturing the equally important environmental and social benefits of passenger rail services. For instance, existing commuter services into Aberdeen play a significant role in reducing road traffic entering the City, which has environmental, social and economic benefits.

**f) How should we compare the benefits from passenger and freight services?**

Whilst it is difficult to directly compare the economic, social or environmental benefits of passenger and freight services, it is important that the environmental and social benefits of passenger services are given appropriate consideration, in addition to the economic benefits addressed by Question 3(e) above. There has to be room for both passenger and freight services in Scotland's railways and accommodating both efficiently requires good planning, communication and understanding between Network Rail, Train Operating Companies and Freight Operating Companies.

#### Question 4

- a) Do you have specific changes you would like to see to the railway? Please be clear what the change would achieve in terms of the overall objectives of promoting economic growth, social inclusion, health and protection of our environment.**

NESTRANS priority rail projects - Crossrail, Strategic Rail and Rail Freight - are outlined in the preamble to this consultation response. These projects are being developed with the support of the Scottish Executive and in consultation with the rail industry and we are committed to seeing them implemented. Their contribution to the overall objectives listed above has and will be tested through the STAG process. We expect all our rail projects to make a positive contribution to the economy, society and environment of north east Scotland and Scotland generally.

Other areas on which we support action are:

- ❖ Improved journey times from the north east to Edinburgh and Glasgow, to make the rail journey more competitive with the journey time by car.
- ❖ Improvements to track capacity and line speed through Fife. This would help address punctuality issues and provide journey time benefits to passengers travelling between the north east and Edinburgh and destinations further south.
- ❖ Improved capacity on First ScotRail services serving the north east. Many services are already consistently busy, with significant overcrowding at particular times. As passenger numbers continue to increase, urgent consideration needs to be given to increasing seating capacity on these services (for instance through the addition of a 4<sup>th</sup> coach on Turbostar sets) and, where necessary, associated enabling infrastructure capacity at stations and in the network.
- ❖ Improved quality of service by First ScotRail. A consistently good quality of service, with clean and comfortable trains is important in encouraging and maintaining train use. We welcome the promise of higher standards in the current franchise but many services remain below an acceptable standard. There is much more that still could be done to deliver a consistently better service.
- ❖ Alleviation of bottlenecks, such as the single-track section at Usan, and the congested area around Stirling.
- ❖ Improved accessibility to full DDA standards at all stations .
- ❖ Enhanced cross-Border services, in particular a reduction in journey time to London by GNER. Also, the introduction of direct services to England via the West Coast would expand the range of destinations available.

These changes would make rail travel more attractive, encouraging more people to use the train. Providing a better rail service to and from the north east for business and leisure travellers is important in maintaining and growing the economy of the north east. By encouraging more people to take the train, road traffic can be reduced, with benefits for the environment and the economy through less congestion.

- b) Are there specific changes in your area that could improve integration of rail services with other forms of transport?**

Significant parts of the NESTRANS area are not served by rail. We would encourage train operators to investigate ways in which integration with bus services could be improved, for instance to provide guaranteed onward connections. Through-ticketing is an element of this, which NESTRANS is working with First ScotRail and local bus operators to progress.



**c) Should any additional future investment in the rail network be focussed on the routes that provide the maximum benefit to the economy, where there is the highest use or potential use by people or freight?**

No, other factors are equally important. This is underlined in the approach of the Scottish Transport Appraisal Guidance, which takes into account accessibility and social inclusion, integration, safety and environmental objectives. In measuring “benefit to the economy”, consideration should be given to investment that assists longer-term economic development as well as to projects that deliver short-term economic growth.

NESTRANS does not support the implication in this section that it is acceptable, in some circumstances, to remove local services to facilitate longer-distance services. Both types of passenger service have an important role in meeting economic, social and environmental objectives.

## **OTHER ISSUES**

### **Project Appraisal and Development Costs**

NESTRANS’ experience in taking forward a number of rail projects has highlighted the time and cost involved in undertaking the appraisal work required by the Scottish Executive and rail industry. NESTRANS would encourage the Scottish Executive to explore any opportunities that may exist as a result of the devolution of rail powers to streamline and simplify the appraisal process for rail projects, in order to reduce the amount of time and cost involved.

### **Delivery Arrangements**

The creation of Transport Scotland and the statutory Regional Transport Partnerships mark a significant change in the way that transport will be delivered in Scotland. There is however a need for greater clarity in the respective roles of national and regional bodies in the development and delivery of rail projects in future. We look forward to working closely with Transport Scotland in the years ahead.

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22 December 2005