

JONATHAN BRAY



ScotRail - so much more than a railway

Scotland's rail franchise is about more than just train services, it's about a vision for a nation. Other parts of the UK should study it

► It's routinely overlooked but the ScotRail franchise is hugely significant. Because it's not about railways per se. This is a franchise that is more about where Scotland wants to be as a place. Economically, socially and culturally.

If it's as good as it sounds then it's in stark contrast to the typical Department for Transport franchise - consumer and operationally focussed and overseen by an absentee landlord. Big splash at the start, little splash at the end - bank the cash, or hand in the keys if you got carried away in trying to win the thing in the first place. Frontline staff stay the same and rail managers rotate through the industry. The absentee owners are laughing all the way to the Deutsche Bank, and if you had to summarise the outcomes for passengers it's, well, middling.

And more widely - in terms of how the railway fits with where GB regions and nations want to be - it's at best fitful. The railways get the big picture that they have a key economic role - and at the other end of the spectrum everyone loves community rail. But overall railway people are there to make railways work, not to make places work.

No shame or surprise in that. Expecting a diminishing band of Whitehall civil servants to mesh rail development with the wider economic, social, transport and environmental needs of tens of thousands of places (some of which they might struggle to pronounce correctly) isn't going to work either. Which is where devolution comes in

because devolved decision makers are close enough to the action to make the connections between what rail can do best for their areas - be it providing access to new housing or development sites; converting routes to tram-train as part of much wider strategies to make the most of limited rail and road capacity in big cities; or finding the best use for local rail station buildings.

Scotland has had the most practice at devolution. Practice begets confidence and the ScotRail franchise is brimming full of confidence. Abellio's bid understood this and went with it. The franchise is based on a breakthrough in thinking which is that if the franchise is going to cost money then let's make the most of that investment by giving Scotland a railway that does something significant for the country as a whole. This is a reversal of the traditional (which, to be fair, is changing),

UK state view that railways cost money so let's make the regions and nations fully aware of it by begrudgingly and provisionally supporting them. Including 'collective punishment' rolling stock and frequencies at the margins - just to make the point.

So how does this 'Devolution 2.0' manifest itself in practice? Firstly the railway is getting itself plugged into Scotland's wider economic development - from the macro to the micro. From having a place at the table on Scotland's National Economic Forum to having a director of economic development to forge better links with local authority economic development teams to make sure the railways mesh with both overarching local economic strategies but also with specific regeneration schemes and bids.

Here's where stations come in too as there's an opportunity for fewer stations to be cold, impersonal and fortified and more of a gateway and opportunity for the sometimes struggling towns they serve. £1m pounds a year of funding for a more ambitious, outward facing community rail programme as well as more combined retail/ticket sales points at smaller stations should also help. As should plugging the railways into the Scottish Towns Partnership, which, as the name suggests, is there to network and assist their revival and prosperity.

There's also read across from ScotRail into Homes for Scotland (the Scottish housing industry trade body) with ScotRail an associate member and looking at the potential for incentive ticketing to target new homes as part of active travel plans.

Expanded apprenticeships programmes, living wage for staff (and throughout the supply chain), and more locally sourced products (for example as part of on-train catering) are also all part of the package, which is closely aligned



A visualisation of the Hitachi AT200 trains that Abellio will acquire for ScotRail

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with the Scottish Government’s wider national performance framework, and which has meaning across every cabinet minister portfolio.

The Borders Railway - the biggest domestic line reopening in a century - is in some ways an exemplar of the ‘more than a railway’ approach. There’s been a concerted effort to ensure that the benefits of making a trip to the Borders less interminable, with joint working between Visit Scotland, Scottish Enterprise, Transport Scotland and the local authorities in the area. This included a coordinated plan with an international tourism promotion campaign, an investment fund to support local business, a new business park at Tweedbank and a major housing development at Shawfair in Midlothian.

There are other unfamiliar aspects to this rail franchise too - a director of health and sustainability, fitbands for staff and an intention to achieve a gold award in the Scottish Healthy Working Lives programme, as well as employee gain share and a seat at the board for a trade union representative. It all sounds more like something from Scandinavia than we are used to from our formerly Surrey-run United Kingdom.

So what about the rail services? The Central Belt is where two thirds of the population live and it’s already criss-crossed by an increasingly intricate and extensive network of growing electrified services. Although the centre of gravity of the central belt rail network has been Strathclyde; Edinburgh Waverley too is now buzzing with commuter trains. The newer ones, which are more comfortable and better specified than some GB intercity trains (step forward the dire Voyagers where it’s impossible to move your elbows even if the table was big enough to accommodate a laptop).

Things will go up a further notch in the Central Belt when the wiring up of the Glasgow to Edinburgh route (both ways through and via Falkirk) is completed, along with the route north to Stirling, Alloa and Dunblane. Seventy extra new Hitachi trains will be zinging along under the wires adding 7,500 extra seats and cutting journey times by one minute out of every five. Interestingly, across the piece, there’s a big focus on driving up off-peak patronage too rather than carrying fresh air - with specific KPIs in the contract for doing so.

Scotland’s internal intercity network has been ‘so so’ for some time with over-promoted



Transport minister Derek Mackay (left) and ScotRail Alliance MD Phil Verster



Borders Railway



ScotRail apprentices

diesel Class 170s offering worse journey times than the car on some services and with journey times worsening overall under the previous franchise. A comprehensively refurbished fleet of HSTs will change all that - offering a ‘big train’ and branded network of services between Scotland’s seven cities with progressively faster journey times and with better targeted and promoted fares offers.

Meanwhile, on scenic routes, the revolutionary aim is to help passengers enjoy them through doing things like clearing the shrubbery that obscures the views, telling passengers which side the views are on, and giving them windows to look at the scenery through rather than the danger of getting a seat with a view of a panel of vintage, off-white BR plastic.

Overnight sleeper services are also due to be transformed on the same basis as the ScotRail franchise i.e. ‘if we are going to pay for them let’s do the job right’. So while the European sleeper network is being cut to ribbons, ministers will soon be cutting the ribbon on world class new Anglo-Scottish sleeper services. Services which not only offer high technical and service standards (with club cars, pod flatbed options and en-suite berths with showers) but which also adhere to the wider

desire that the railway should say something about how Scotland sees itself now, and where it wants to be in the future. So the mattresses will be made by a social enterprise firm in Aberdeen, and a large majority of the food and drink on board will be from Scottish SMEs.

The ScotRail franchise is ambitious and promising what will be done is the easy bit. But if it delivers then it too could be transitional. Transitional to a post-franchising world where the current deep alliance with Network Rail and the social enterprise trappings of the current franchise become something more profoundly different and exciting.

Meanwhile, right now there are also two lessons for the rest of Great Britain. If you are going to pay for a rail network then get the most from it and do the job properly. And if all you think about when specifying a rail franchise is train services - then think again. ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

▶ Jonathan Bray is the director of the Urban Transport Group. Throughout his career in policy and lobbying roles he has been at the frontline in bringing about more effective, sustainable and equitable transport policies.