



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee

Wednesday 13 January 2021

Session 5



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RURAL ECONOMY AND CONNECTIVITY COMMITTEE

1st Meeting 2021, Session 5

CONVENER

*Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Maureen Watt (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Peter Chapman (North East Scotland) (Con)

*John Finnie (Highlands and Islands) (Green)

*Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con)

*Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP)

*Richard Lyle (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)

*Angus MacDonald (Falkirk East) (SNP)

*Mike Rumbles (North East Scotland) (LD)

*Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab)

*Stewart Stevenson (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Alex Hynes (Scotland's Railway)

David Simpson (ScotRail)

Liam Sumpter (Network Rail Scotland)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Steve Farrell

LOCATION

Virtual Meeting

Scottish Parliament

Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee

Wednesday 13 January 2021

[The Convener opened the meeting at 08:45]

Interests

The Convener (Edward Mountain): Good morning, everyone, and welcome to the committee's first meeting in 2021. I ask everyone to put their mobile phones on silent. This meeting will be conducted virtually, with all of our members and witnesses participating remotely. I know that members are experts at this by now, but I remind them and the witnesses to watch for their microphones switching on before they start to speak, so that we do not miss anything that they are about to say.

The first item on the agenda this morning is a declaration of interests. I invite the new member of the committee, Jamie Halcro Johnston, to declare any relevant interests. Good morning, Jamie.

Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Good morning, convener. Thank you very much, and happy new year to everyone.

I declare that I am a member of—*[Interruption.]*

The Convener: I suggest that we mute Jamie while the fire alarm test is going on at Holyrood, and I will come back to him after the tannoy announcements.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: If I could come in, convener—

The Convener: Before I cue you back in, Jamie, I wish to thank Oliver Mundell very much at this stage for his time on the committee. He played an important part in the committee, and I think that he attended just about every meeting that he was able to.

On the basis that the tannoy announcements have told you that this is only a practice fire alarm, Jamie, I invite you to declare your interests.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: I am a partner in the farming business of J Halcro-Johnston and Sons, and I own agricultural land in Orkney. I think that those are the interests that will be most relevant to the committee.

The Convener: Thank you very much, Jamie.

Rail Services

08:47

The Convener: Item 2 is an evidence session on rail services, with witnesses from Abellio ScotRail and Network Rail. This forms part of a series of regular updates that the committee receives to allow it to monitor the rail network and rail service performance issues. The committee last heard evidence from Abellio ScotRail at its meeting of 10 June 2020, when it considered the impact of Covid-19 on transport. The committee will now discuss recent rail service operations and performance, including the continued impact of Covid-19, and rail franchise issues.

I welcome our witnesses: Alex Hynes, managing director of Scotland's Railway; David Simpson, ScotRail's operations director; and Liam Sumpter, the chief operating officer of Network Rail Scotland.

Good morning, Alex. Would you like to make a brief opening statement?

Alex Hynes (Scotland's Railway): Good morning. Thank you for inviting Scotland's Railway, which is the partnership between ScotRail and Network Rail Scotland, to participate in this morning's evidence session.

As with almost every aspect of our lives, the coronavirus has changed our railway fundamentally. Right now, our passenger numbers are down by 90 per cent compared with the same time last year. During these tough times, the priority of our staff has been on keeping key workers such as nurses and carers, as well as vital freight, moving safely and reliably across the country.

Since March, Scotland's Railway has broken the mould to ensure that we are supporting the country in these most difficult, unprecedented times. I thank the thousands of staff across Scotland's Railway who have done an outstanding job of delivering and managing that change. Pre-pandemic, the railway was not exactly famous for its ability to implement change at speed but, during the pandemic, we have repeatedly acted quickly to deliver the service that is needed to meet the times.

During the first lockdown, we reduced the number of services that we operated, and we steadily increased them as restrictions were eased. Under the latest restrictions, we are again reviewing our timetable to match capacity better with demand and to provide value for money for the taxpayer. We will share any changes with the committee. All of that has been achieved through partnership working with colleagues from across

the industry, including Transport Scotland, the trade unions, British Transport Police and Transport Focus.

Since I previously appeared before the committee, we have dealt with the tragic derailment at Stonehaven in August. The date of 12 August 2020 will be seared into the memories of many of us for ever, and we continue to mourn the loss of the train driver, Brett McCullough; the conductor, Donald Dinnie; and passenger Christopher Stuchbury. We await the outcome of a number of investigations into what happened. Network Rail has instigated two expert-led reviews into how to better manage the effect of climate change on our railway and reduce the chances of anything such as that happening again.

As the good news on vaccines continues, we are working hard to be ready to welcome back more customers when restrictions are eased. Customers will have different demands from those before the pandemic. Whether that means new ticket types, different timetables, smarter ways of delivering improvement works or better technology, we know that reform of the railway is needed to match potential customers' transformed expectations and the economic reality.

The pressure on the public finances means that all parts of the rail industry—the operators, Network Rail, the Government, the supply chain, trade unions and others—will need to work much harder to deliver a more cost-effective railway. We do not underestimate the challenges that are ahead, but the work that we do—whether that is investing in our people, growing our economy or connecting communities—should never be underestimated. Now, more than ever, we are ready to play our part in the economic recovery and to make the case for continued investment in Scotland's railway.

The Convener: Before we take questions—there are quite a few—Stewart Stevenson will declare his interests.

Stewart Stevenson (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): I declare that I am the honorary president of the Scottish Association for Public Transport and an honorary vice-president of Railfuture in the United Kingdom.

To abuse my privilege slightly, I wish to say how much I regret the deaths in the railway accident in north-east Scotland, particularly as I regularly met Donald Dinnie, who brightened every journey when he was there serving customers. He was not alone, but he will be missed.

The Convener: I am sure that your views echo the thoughts of other committee members.

Peter Chapman (North East Scotland) (Con): Good morning, panel. I, too, will say something

about the desperately sad accident just south of Stonehaven, which was very much on my patch. That was an absolute disaster that involved loss of life. The only positive that we can find is that only a handful of people were on the train on that day. I shudder to think what the loss of life might have been on a normal day, with many more people aboard the train. A tragedy occurred, and it could have been much worse.

Alex Hynes said that passenger numbers are down by 90 per cent; we were given the figure of 80 per cent, but maybe the situation is even worse than that. You have adjusted your timetables because footfall is much less. Given the new level of lockdown—it is possible that even more severe restrictions may come in today; we do not know yet—what are your plans to adjust timetables going forward?

Alex Hynes: Our approach will be same as our approach since March last year. Twice a week, ScotRail, Network Rail Scotland and Transport Scotland get together and review what is happening with demand. It can change on a daily basis, and the number of passengers travelling directly correlates with the health restrictions that are in force at any given time.

After lockdown 1, we had recovered to 30 per cent of normal demand. However, since lockdown restrictions were tightened after boxing day, customers have left the railway again. We are now operating 80 per cent of our services for about 10 per cent of customers. That is not very sensible, so we are actively looking at operating shorter trains where possible. Timetable reductions are also under active consideration.

We want to ensure that we are being a good and efficient operator and saving the taxpayer money, but we also need to provide enough seats for the customers who are travelling—about 30,000 every day—and allow those customers enough space for physical distancing. It is a really delicate balance, which we are reviewing daily. It is likely that, in the coming weeks, we will reduce the length of trains and the timetable as a result of the latest restrictions, which no one expects will be relaxed soon.

Peter Chapman: I want to follow that up a wee bit. When you are looking at the timetable, is there any opportunity for the travelling customer to be involved in that process? Although there might be only 10 per cent of the usual capacity on a train, that train could be vital to enable a person to get to their work or do what they need to do. You obviously need to cut services to be reasonably sensible, but you also need to remember that there are people on the train who absolutely rely on that service, and you need to deliver, if you can, a service that fits their lifestyle.

Alex Hynes: You are absolutely right. The people who are currently using rail services are those who absolutely need to travel, whether they are going to stock shelves in a supermarket or care for people in the healthcare sector. They are often shift workers as well. Our approach has therefore been to ensure that we operate a service across the whole network. Where possible, we have protected early and late trains in recognition of the shift-work nature of a lot of essential jobs.

Every time we change the timetable, we look carefully at the demand that we are seeing. We also consult with the regional transport partnerships to ensure that we have picked up any local aspects. We have recently been able to consult with national health service boards, for example.

Given that we are operating at less than our full capacity, and there are relatively few customers travelling, we have been able to respond to specific feedback from customers or an employer—or, indeed, from a parliamentarian—such as a request that we tweak a timetable to better match how people are using the rail services. We listen to our staff, who are our eyes and ears out there on the network, and we ensure that, every day, we trawl through all the feedback that we get on social media and use that intelligence to tweak the timetable. That has been an important tool in our armoury to help us to manage the pandemic situation.

The Convener: I have a couple of questions. First, do you think that the emergency measures agreement and the provisos within it are working well? That is a general question—I want to drill into costs a bit as well.

Alex Hynes: The emergency measures agreement is working well. Transport Scotland stepped in swiftly and decisively to provide additional funding for the rail industry to ensure that services could still run in an environment in which, at the height of lockdown 1, revenue had collapsed by 95 per cent. That is one aspect of the pandemic situation that has worked effectively.

09:00

The Convener: You mentioned the additional costs. As I understand it, there has been an extra cost of about £469 million, which is on top of the already factored in costs. What is the actual cost of operating the railways as we are doing now? How much will that cost per year, given the current agreements that are in place?

Alex Hynes: It depends on what happens to revenue, and that is changing every day. There is no fixed profile for subsidy at the moment. Essentially, if revenue falls, the taxpayer injects more money into the rail industry in Scotland to

account for that shortfall and to keep services running. The economics of the railway in Scotland are that the rail network—that is, both ScotRail and Network Rail—costs broadly about £1 billion a year, and ScotRail's fare-box revenue in a typical year is about £350 million. If that falls by 90 per cent, we are talking about additional funding in the region of hundreds of millions of pounds.

As I said, we try to reduce that call on taxpayer funding by looking at the costs of the services that we run—we consider the length of trains and the number of services, for example. However, the nature of the rail industry means that most of our costs are fixed, because they relate to infrastructure, rolling stock and staff, for example. It will be a very considerable sum of money that is in the hundreds of millions of pounds.

The Convener: Just to be entirely clear so that I understand this, you are saying that, if passenger levels stay at the current levels, it could cost about £1.3 billion a year to run the railway as it is functioning at the moment, given that there are very limited savings that you could make because of the fixed costs.

Alex Hynes: I do not think that we should be that specific about the numbers, but hundreds of millions of pounds of extra funding has had to be made available to keep services running, and the situation changes on a daily and weekly basis. It is a significant amount of money. Our priority is to ensure that we are being a good and efficient operator, that the taxpayer is getting value for money and of course that we are delivering for the people who absolutely need to use the network, who at the moment are essential workers.

The Convener: How long do you think the EMAs and additional financial support will be needed for? Will it be until passenger numbers get back to where they were before, or is there a shorter timescale?

Alex Hynes: The honest answer is that nobody knows, because nobody knows how passenger demand will recover, rebound or emerge post pandemic. At the moment, we are doing some scenario planning as to how we expect demand to recover. Clearly, once we get the final green light from the public health authorities, we will be out there marketing and promoting our product as much as possible to get as many passengers back on our network as possible, because that is the best way to reduce the cost to the taxpayer.

However, as I said, the honest answer is that no one knows how long that support will be needed for; the best example of that is commuting. Roughly a third of our traffic is commuting traffic. Will we go back to pre-pandemic levels of commuting? I do not think so. There is evidence to suggest that, for office workers, commuting will in

essence become a discretionary activity, so we need to think about how to change our business accordingly. We will have to be able to respond to the new market demand rather than just put back what was there before.

The Convener: We will come on to that issue later—I think that one of my colleagues has a question on that.

Mike Rumbles wants to say something at this point. Are you on an Apple machine, Mike? If you are, you should unmute yourself.

Mike Rumbles (North East Scotland) (LD): Can you hear me now?

The Convener: We can—thank goodness.

Mike Rumbles: I would like to follow on from the convener's questions. I know that Alex Hynes might not have the figures yet because we are only at the beginning of 2021, but it would be useful for the committee to get information that will give us a handle on what funding you received from the Scottish Government during 2020, and how that compares with what you received in 2019. It would be good if you could write to the committee on that.

Alex Hynes: As each emergency measures agreement concludes, we will work with Transport Scotland to confirm to the committee exactly what funding was received in that period. We are happy to do that.

The Convener: Thank you. It would help our budget scrutiny if we have a handle on what we think it will cost the railways to run this year.

Richard Lyle (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): My question has already been touched on. Passenger numbers have fallen by 80 to 90 per cent since March 2020, as Alex Hynes said. It is likely that the national lockdown that began on 5 January 2021 will continue to reduce passenger numbers from the levels that were seen last November and December, which will severely reduce your income. What action does the Scottish Government, ScotRail and the rail industry need to take once the pandemic is over—whenever that may be—to encourage people to return to rail travel? Is work being done on that issue?

Alex Hynes: The vaccination programme is welcome, and we very much look forward to getting the final green light from public health authorities, because there is little point in us encouraging more usage of the network at the moment. That would be against the public health restrictions. Even if they are eased, there will be a chance that they might be tightened again, so any such work would be a waste of money.

We are going to go hell for leather to recover our revenue as fast as we possibly can when we get that green light, and we also need to consider new and emerging markets. Everyone expects leisure travel to bounce back more quickly than commuting and business travel, so we are working on some plans to encourage leisure travel. It is possible that, because of international travel restrictions, staycations will be popular in 2021. We have therefore been working away in the background recreating an intercity network for Scotland with our new upgraded high-speed trains and have been working on our active travel carriages for the west Highland line in order to make our leisure products more attractive to the market.

We are also looking at some exciting ticketing technology to make it even easier to buy tickets from us than it is already. Further, we are working through some scenarios about how commuting might rebound, or not, as the case may be, and what that might mean for our timetable.

We are operating in an environment in which there is a high degree of uncertainty. Nobody knows what the future holds, but we need to scenario plan and respond quickly so that we can do the best possible job for our passengers and the taxpayer.

Richard Lyle: I agree with you. I think that train travel is one of the most exciting things that we can do, and I am looking forward to doing that when I retire—hopefully in the next number of months.

I was a bit concerned when you spoke earlier about shorter trains. The main line between Glasgow and Edinburgh runs through my constituency, and I generally see trains with three or five carriages. During the Covid period, I would prefer you to leave the trains the size that they are at the moment rather than shortening them, to ensure that there is social distancing. Why do you want to shorten your trains? I can understand that that might be for cost reasons but, from a passenger point of view, I would much prefer a longer train than a shorter one.

Alex Hynes: I completely understand that. We have been looking at that issue really carefully. The rail network in Scotland currently has a 1m plus rule for physical distancing. The “plus” means that it is mandatory for face coverings to be worn at stations and trains by those who can wear them.

In our timetable planning work, we are assuming that there will be 2m physical distancing—in order to be generous with distancing, essentially. We look carefully at the levels of customers who are travelling. We make calculations based on allowing 2m physical distancing between every

customer who is travelling and we size the train on that basis. We would shorten train services only if the number of people travelling allowed for 2m physical distancing.

Richard Lyle: Okay—that is fine; that explains it. That is all from me, convener.

The Convener: Thank you, Richard. The next questions are from John Finnie.

John Finnie (Highlands and Islands) (Green): As you will have worked out, convener, the question that I had planned to ask has been well and truly thrashed out already. Therefore, I will instead push Mr Hynes a little bit on future demand. You have talked about modelling, but are you able to share with us any techniques for how you assess future demand? I know that it might appear just to be a finger-in-the-wind approach, but can lessons be learned from other occasions to help your modelling?

I will roll two questions into one. Is your modelling based on an assumption that there will be no contraction of the number of routes? If so, can you give some assurance on future staffing levels?

Alex Hynes: All the models that are used to predict rail demand and revenue are based on historical relationships, so there is a question mark about how useful those models are in predicting the future. We are pretty sure that the coronavirus has changed lots of things and that we will not go back to how things were before the pandemic. It would be naive to assume that all the passengers whom we used to carry will come back straight away. There is a big health warning on any of our modelling, because it is based on history rather than on what has happened in the past 10 months.

Essentially, we go about scenario planning by breaking down the rail market into three primary purposes of travel: commuting, business and leisure. On the basis of the research that we get from our customer panel, the demand that we see in our daily revenue numbers, the research that Transport Focus is doing and the research that we get from business organisations such as the Confederation of British Industry, we are able to produce high, medium and low scenarios for each of those markets.

For example, the CBI expects office workers, who are a big part of our commuting market, to divide their time evenly between home and the office, so they might travel into the office two or three times a week. Clearly, that will have an impact on the type of ticket that they will want to buy. We are trying to anticipate those trends so that, when we are ready to go again and recover the revenue, we provide products, services and timetables that are relevant to the new markets, which will inevitably have changed.

We are looking at the whole network being open in the future—no one is talking about closing bits of the rail network in Scotland. Before the pandemic, the popularity of the railway in Scotland had never been higher, we were growing strongly, customer satisfaction with the rail network in Scotland has never been higher and we have ambitious plans to decarbonise the rail network. Indeed, if we are to decarbonise Scotland, we will have to deliver modal shift on to rail transport.

09:15

I see railways being at the heart of our post-pandemic recovery, but we must never take for granted customers' patronage or taxpayers' support for that process. We must be ready to respond to the new markets that will inevitably emerge—this year, I hope.

John Finnie: Thank you very much, indeed, Mr Hynes.

Stewart Stevenson: I want to explore the impact of the pandemic on staff who work for ScotRail and, to the extent that it might be possible for you to comment on them, those in related industries who are not directly in your employment, such as subcontractors. If you have comments on their situation, those would be useful.

As will also have been true of the retail sector, the public-facing element of your staff will have faced the challenge of ensuring public compliance with the measures aimed at protecting everyone's health—the wearing of face masks, social distancing and so forth. I hear that such compliance on the rail network has been comparatively good, and perhaps better than it has been in other areas. How are your staff coping? What support are you able to give them? Their stress levels will undoubtedly have risen because of their physical environment, as well as their personal worries about the future. I ask that you comment on those aspects of your staff's situation.

Alex Hynes: Clearly, in an environment in which 95 per cent of our customers vanished pretty quickly but we still had to operate our service, throwing our arms around our people was our number 1 priority. When the coronavirus hit, we first had to ensure that the production of the railway was made Covid secure in every environment and setting, including the driving, controlling, signalling and maintaining of trains. We took steps such as suspending driver training, because it is not possible to maintain physical distance in a cab. We suspended our hospitality operations and diverted those staff into train cleaning, the levels of which we have trebled since the coronavirus hit. In our control centre, we fitted

Perspex screens between workstations and introduced temperature checking to ensure that we kept our premises, the production of the railway and our people as safe as possible.

Of course, although many people were working from home, our people were out on the front line, delivering a vital public service. As is a completely human reaction, they were nervous, because, back in March, we did not know much at all about the virus.

The rail industry in Britain quickly established the rail industry coronavirus forum, which works with the four trade unions, at general secretary level, on the principles of how we would operate. In Scotland, we established our own rail recovery task force. It has a sub-group that is specifically aimed at partnership working, in which the four trade unions have worked with us to navigate issues such as re-risk assessing all our activity. That has included putting in measures to provide hand sanitiser, as well as the hundreds of other measures that ScotRail and Network Rail have had to take across our networks to ensure that we can continue to run our railways. That has been a big part of our work, and it continues to be so. Twice a week, we meet the trade unions to work through all that. David Simpson, ScotRail's operations director, chairs those meetings. Perhaps he might wish to come in at this point to provide more detail.

David Simpson (ScotRail): I support Alex Hynes' comments that involving the trade unions has been a key feature in all the discussions on how the industry should respond to coronavirus. We have spoken to them throughout the pandemic, we have taken their views on board and we have followed the guidelines issued nationally by the rail industry coronavirus forum, adapting those where necessary to reflect the environment in Scotland.

That has been effective in establishing a two-way communication flow, allowing us to ensure not only that colleagues, trade unions and their members were aware of what was going on, but that we could receive feedback, which enabled us to adjust how we were responding.

That has also worked in our timetabling, because we have taken intelligence on demand, peaks and troughs and so forth from the staff who work the trains and used that information to make sure that our adjustments of the timetables are suitable for the customers.

We have significantly increased the level of communication from ScotRail and Network Rail to our front-line staff so that they know what is going on, receive the latest guidelines and can provide feedback. We have also made sure that they have the appropriate personal protective equipment to

keep their activities safe on board the trains and at stations, and in restrooms and backroom offices. We have been focused on making sure that physical distancing can be established and that our staff are kept safe when on breaks between duties and when working on the trains.

That partnership approach with trade unions has been effective in having a positive relationship in which to work with through the pandemic. That will continue to be the case as we navigate the next few weeks and months.

Stewart Stevenson: I have just a brief follow-up question, convener, as that was pretty comprehensive.

As MSPs, we receive regular reports from Transport Focus on the view of the travelling public and the non-travelling public. I am sure that you will also see what Transport Focus says. Does the experience of your staff in relation to travellers accord with what Transport Focus says, or are there any particular insights that come from that other axis of communication between your staff and the customers?

Alex Hynes: Transport Focus is part of our rail recovery task force, so its insight and research help to shape our plans. Transport Focus tells us that people who are travelling are very satisfied with the service that is being delivered and that their considerations are primarily around space for physical distancing, compliance with face coverings and cleanliness. Those are the issues that matter to our people as well, and we have been working really hard on all of them.

We have two customer service centres in Scotland—one in Paisley and one in Dunfermline—and we have a network of 6,500 cameras across the network. I receive a report twice a day in which we track customer numbers and compliance with face coverings. We report on any alleged compromises of physical distancing, and each and every one of those gets followed up, to make sure that we are providing as safe a network for our staff and customers as is possible.

Maureen Watt (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): Good morning, convener, committee and panel. Before I start my questions, I congratulate ScotRail on the national railway heritage award that it received for the work at Stirling station. That is first class—well done.

Will you provide an update on the implementation of the actions that were set out in the two ScotRail remedial plans and the impact that that has had on performance? Clearly, it has been disrupted by Covid, but do you think that the improved performance can be maintained when significant passenger numbers return? What impact will that have on station dwell times and on time performance?

Alex Hynes: First, I thank Maureen Watt for that. We were very pleased to receive that award. ScotRail and Network Rail work hard on heritage; in fact, we recently established a heritage board for Scotland's railway, recognising the interest in rail heritage as we continue to modernise our network.

You are absolutely right; as part of the remedial plan, we had to improve train service performance and customer satisfaction. We put £22 million of investment into those areas and I am pleased to say that we have delivered some great results on both customer satisfaction and train service performance.

Pre-pandemic, performance and customer service were improving. Those trends have continued during the pandemic, and we are working hard to ensure that they are sustainable. I will give an example of that: on the National Rail passenger survey in the spring of last year, we delivered a result of 90 per cent customer satisfaction. That is the highest that it has ever been on Scotland's railway. We have hit 90 per cent in the past, but it has never been higher than that, so we are at record customer satisfaction, which is good to see.

On train service performance, we have a target in the franchise agreement—and Network Rail has a target through the regulatory settlement—of 92.5 per cent for punctuality, which we measure based on the public performance measure. We are at 92.0 per cent, so we are only a whisker away from delivering that; we are nearly there. Cynics will say that operating conditions are very favourable because we are not operating many services and do not have many passengers, but the trains and infrastructure do not know that there is a pandemic. We have done a lot of great work on rolling stock reliability, train crew availability and infrastructure reliability—particularly through the management of performance in different seasons: summer, winter and autumn.

In recent weeks, we have also introduced a new timetable in the north electrics area of Glasgow, exploiting the investment that we made in a platform arrangement at Milngavie in which we invested £5 million. That has enabled us to restructure our timetable and deliver a huge boost in punctuality.

We have not been sat here only managing the pandemic; we have been working hard to ensure that, when customers return to the network, the quality of service is the best that it can be, because we are, of course, going to need to do that to get customer numbers back. We have done so by upgrading our class 380 trains in Glasgow—the high-speed trains—and completing the refurbishment of Queen Street station in Glasgow. Aberdeen and Motherwell train stations are also

being redeveloped. We are continuing to invest record amounts in the rail network to ensure that we can provide the very best service to our customers.

Maureen Watt: There are league tables for ScotRail's performance against that of other train companies in the rest of the UK. Do you have figures on customer satisfaction and performance from that to hand?

Alex Hynes: We have the best punctuality and the highest customer satisfaction rate of all the large operators in Great Britain. However, we are not complacent and want to keep driving up train service performance and customer satisfaction. We are proud of our record, but we know that we need to do more.

Maureen Watt: My next question is whether you can provide an update on the roll-out of the refurbished high-speed trains on routes between Aberdeen and Inverness, and Glasgow and Edinburgh. Are those now in service or are do unrefurbished trains still continue to run?

Alex Hynes: The good news is that all the high-speed trains that are in operation have been upgraded. We removed the unrefurbished high-speed trains last year—from memory, I think that it was in May. Therefore, if someone takes an intercity journey between the seven cities in Scotland now, the chances are that they will travel on an upgraded high-speed train, which customers love.

The refurbishment of all 25 trains is now complete and, during the course of the next few weeks and months, we will start adding a fifth carriage to some of them. Not only have we upgraded the quality of service, we are also increasing the number of seats. That will be important as we try to get the leisure market back—hopefully, this year. As I am sure that Maureen Watt will know from personal experience, at certain peak travel times, the trains between the central belt and the north-east and Highlands have been quite popular historically, and we need more capacity.

09:30

The trains have been upgraded in a way that is good for Scotland. We have lined the seats up with the windows and have created huge areas for luggage storage, so it is a much more pleasant experience—a genuine intercity-level quality for our seven-cities service. That has all been happening during the pandemic. Of course, lots of people have not experienced it yet, but when we are able to welcome customers back to the network, they will see a much better service.

Maureen Watt: The service that links Aberdeen and Inverness to Glasgow and Edinburgh has gone to being every two hours instead of every hour. Is when it will go back to being hourly a chicken-and-egg question, or do you have an agreement with the Scottish Government that, when passenger numbers reach X, you will put the service back to being hourly? How does it work?

Alex Hynes: It depends primarily on two things. The first is the public health restrictions that are in force at the time. At the moment, it is essential travel only, and people should not leave the local authority area. Of course, that suppresses the rail market hugely. The second thing is demand. You are absolutely right that there is a bit of circularity. That is why ScotRail, Network Rail and Transport Scotland review the situation twice a week to ensure that we are constantly dialling up or dialling down our service so that it is appropriate and so that we deliver the best service that balances passenger demand, the call on the taxpayer and the need not to encourage non-essential travel or unduly expose our people to the virus.

It is a delicate balancing act, which we think that we have got broadly right since March last year. However, we need to continue to do that, because the most challenging bits of the pandemic might yet be in the future, particularly given the new strain of the virus, to which we are very alive.

The Convener: Thank you. The next question is from Colin Smyth. I think that I may have ignored an earlier request from him to come in with a question, but I am sure that he will build that in.

Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): I will do my best to pivot back to that issue. For the time being, I turn to the future of the franchise system. Before the start of the pandemic, it was clear that the current franchising system was very much finished. Even its most ardent supporter, the UK Government, had established the Williams review to consider alternatives. Unfortunately, that review is a wee bit like the holy grail—we think that it might be out there, but none of us has seen it. There were hints that some type of concessionary scheme might replace franchising, but we do not know whether the current level of risk has scared the Government off that. Do witnesses have any idea of what the structural options might be in any future UK Government white paper and how does that impact on planning for the future in Network Rail and ScotRail?

Alex Hynes: ScotRail and Network Rail Scotland continue to work in deep partnership through the ScotRail Alliance. We have done that for six years or so, and I think that we are working together more closely than ever before.

Colin Smyth is quite right. The UK Government commissioned a review into the rail industry

structure a while back. We have not seen the output of that. I think that Chris Heaton-Harris, who is the rail minister at Westminster, declared in December that he was hoping that it would be published in the following six weeks, which would be by the end of January. We do not know whether that will happen.

We know that Transport Scotland has an aspiration for a single publicly controlled organisation to run the railway in Scotland. That is clearly a conversation to be had between the Scottish Government and the United Kingdom Government. We are also looking forward to seeing the white paper, if and when it is published.

We continue to operate the current service well by being a good and efficient operator. Although the franchise might end at the end of March next year, or Network Rail funding might be secure only to 2024, we are working on medium and long-term plans for the rail network. Whether the plans involve decarbonisation of the network by 2035, or projects such as reopening the rail line to Levenmouth, we are planning ahead, regardless of the conversations that might be happening about the structure of the rail industry in the UK and Scotland.

Colin Smyth: Just to be clear, do you anticipate that the current process of EMAs will simply continue until the current Abellio ScotRail franchise ends in March 2022? Is that in effect the nature of your discussions with the Government? We know that the Government in Scotland rejected the model that has been adopted in Wales, whereby, from next month, Transport for Wales will be taken into public ownership via an operator of last resort. Is it your view that EMAs will simply continue in Scotland until at least March 2022?

Alex Hynes: Yes, it is my expectation that EMAs will continue until the end of March 2022. The current EMA runs until the end of March this year, so we have a 12-month EMA to negotiate. It needs to be negotiated, but my expectation is that there will be a further EMA after the current one to take us to what would have been the end of the Abellio ScotRail franchise.

Colin Smyth: Recently, the Scottish Government published a draft franchise and policy statement, which starts the process for the next ScotRail franchise under the current structure. If that structure is to continue for the moment, which seems to be the case, is there sufficient time to complete that process, given that the current franchise is scheduled to come to an end in over a year? Is there any evidence that there are private companies out there that are likely to want to bid for such a franchise, or is it possible that the Government may extend the existing franchise?

Alex Hynes: The answer is that we do not know what will happen after the end of March 2022. Although the current law requires franchising authorities to run a competition for passenger rail services, neither the UK Government nor the Scottish Government wants to do that, so we are in a curious position. That is why it is important that we see the white paper. Hopefully, we will see it soon, so that we can plan for the future. The honest answer is that we do not know what will happen after 1 April 2022, because we have not seen the white paper.

Colin Smyth: I will go back to the issue that I was going to raise. I echo the point that Alex Hynes made in his opening remarks about thanking our transport workers for the amazing job that they are doing to keep Scotland moving in the face of the pandemic.

Is it possible to give the committee an update on current discussions regarding the pay of rail workers? As you know, last year's pay discussions, never mind this year's, were put on hold even before the pandemic. There was no provision in the EMAs for any pay uplifts. Has ScotRail been given permission by the Government to restart negotiations over pay, and where are we with any such discussions?

Alex Hynes: The short answer to your question is yes. Transport Scotland has now allowed ScotRail to enter into discussions on pay. As we were talking about earlier, in order to maintain rail services during the pandemic, the Government has had to inject a large sum of money into the rail industry in Scotland; therefore, affordability is a big issue. The Scottish Government's position involves consideration of whether there is an opportunity to fund a pay rise through efficiency or productivity. In the coming weeks and months, we will be having conversations with Transport Scotland and the trade unions to consider what the art of the possible is. Our people have done an outstanding job, and we like to see them rewarded for it.

Colin Smyth: Just to be clear, there are no funds in any of the EMAs at the moment to fund any pay changes.

Alex Hynes: No, there are not. The taxpayer support that has already been injected into the business has meant that we have not had to make any redundancies and we have not furloughed a single person. The money that has been provided by the Government has delivered job security for our staff, which we are very grateful for. The view is that any pay rise should be funded through efficiency and/or productivity, and discussions will happen to see what is possible.

The Convener: Before we move on, can I confirm that Transport Scotland would have to

approve any pay rise? You will tell Transport Scotland what has been suggested, but it is up to it to sign that off—you do not have authority to do that. Is that right?

Alex Hynes: Under the terms of the emergency measures agreements for ScotRail and other operators across Britain, operators are not permitted to make any changes to terms and conditions without the consent of the franchising authority, which in this case is Transport Scotland.

The Convener: So the simple answer is yes.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): I wish a good morning to our witnesses.

I am sure that the challenges of the pandemic are the number 1 priority right now, and that progress on future rail plans, including for decarbonisation, which Alex Hynes mentioned, has probably been interrupted. I am interested in Transport Scotland's decarbonisation plan for rail, which is already a low carbon-emitting form of transport because of passenger travel and freight. We have a colourful map in front of us that shows proposals for electrification, and for alternatives including hydrogen and battery power. What progress has there been with decarbonisation? Will it be delivered by 2035, which seems to be quite an ambitious target? The costs are not outlined in the rail decarbonisation action plan. Have they been decided?

Alex Hynes: In July, the Scottish Government published the "Rail Services Decarbonisation Action Plan", which says that the Government wants to decarbonise the rail network in Scotland by 2035, which is brilliant. Since then, ScotRail, Network Rail and Transport Scotland have been working to develop our plans accordingly.

We are starting from a good place: 75 per cent of journeys that are made on ScotRail are already on electric trains. The vast majority of our network is decarbonised already, although clearly we need to move to net zero emissions, which we will do through a combination of battery electric trains, hydrogen and classic electrification of the network.

Along with the Scottish Government, we have recently been reviewing what we call our pipeline of rail enhancements. In a typical year, the Scottish Government might spend £200 million upgrading the rail network. We are expecting that to increase to help to fund decarbonisation. We are trying to create what we are calling a rolling programme of decarbonisation, in which we all know exactly what we will be doing for the next 14 years. By doing that, we can drive down the unit cost of decarbonisation. We think that, if we were able to have visibility on electrification for the next five, 10 or 14 years, we might be able to take 25 to 30 per cent out of the unit cost of electrification. We are trying to make sure that we work smarter,

so that we can deliver more decarbonisation for a fixed sum of money.

The honest answer to the question is that the plan is under development. Discussions between ScotRail, Network Rail and Transport Scotland are intensifying because, as Emma Harper rightly pointed out, 14 years is not very far away, in railway terms. However, meeting the target is completely doable.

09:45

The Convener: Thank you. Emma Harper has had problems with her link, but she is back. Emma—did you hear all of that answer?

Emma Harper: I missed the whole of Alex Hynes's answer.

The Convener: Due to limitations of time, I am afraid that I cannot go back to that answer. I will give you a moment to sort out your connection, and will try and bring you in at the end. The next question is from John Finnie.

John Finnie: There are a lot of challenges in rail decarbonisation, but the biggest challenge that the planet faces is the climate emergency, so—unlike Emma Harper—I do not think that the target for decarbonisation is ambitious, and would like it to be brought forward to 2030.

However, that point is not for Mr Hynes, who rightly identified that welcome progress has been made in electrification. There is a challenge in relation to lines in the area that I represent, including the far north line, the west Highland line and the Kyle line. The suggestion is that they will have alternative traction by 2035. Can you outline what needs to happen to make that a reality?

It would also be helpful if you could outline some of the costs. What is your response to the suggestion—this is not my position—that a cost benefit analysis should say that the cost of decarbonisation would be disproportionate to the amount of carbon emissions that are created by your existing diesel fleet?

Alex Hynes: Clearly, it is a Government objective to decarbonise by 2035. That will require some funding, but we already receive a lot of funding. We have identified hydrogen as an option for decarbonising the far north line, the Kyle line and the west Highland line. Classic electrification tends to work well where the rail service is relatively intense, so it is much harder to make a business case for putting wires up on the bits of the network where the train service is less intense.

A number of us from ScotRail and Network Rail Scotland went to Germany before the pandemic to look at the Alstom hydrogen train, which is already in passenger service there, to do work on the

experience of operating hydrogen trains. We are thinking about how we can introduce hydrogen trains on the bits of the network that John Finnie mentioned. We need to know, for example, what the hydrogen distribution network would look like, because the hydrogen needs to be stored. We also need to know how the operating costs of diesel and hydrogen compare. We do not want to replace a diesel train with a hydrogen train if the hydrogen train is going to be more expensive to operate, because that would increase the subsidy.

At the same time, we need to think about the attractiveness of the product. The trains on those routes will become life-expired by about 2035, so we have the opportunity to put in brand new trains that are much more attractive to customers, in order to earn more revenue. The lines in question are our scenic lines—they are brand Scotland's gems. If we look around the world, we see that people are prepared to pay top dollar for fantastic scenic experiences. If we are going to buy new trains for those bits of the network, let us make them really good ones in order that we can exploit the market for scenic experiences. I talked earlier about having to adapt in a post-pandemic world in order to exploit new markets. That is one example of how we could do that.

We are looking at hydrogen trains and experiences of operating them. We need to work hard on the business case—on costs and revenues—so that we can deliver that. The 26th United Nations conference of the parties will take place in Glasgow in November this year, at which we will showcase hydrogen and battery trains to show the public and people attending the conference the new technologies that are available to us in order that we can decarbonise. We will see much more classic electrification, with some hybrid battery electric technology and some hydrogen technology, which will come together to deliver decarbonisation by 2035.

John Finnie: Green hydrogen from renewable resources is a limited resource that is needed in parts of the economy where there are no alternatives. Battery trains that can charge where there are overhead wires might be a better option. That information is from a document that my party produced recently. I would be very concerned if it were a binary choice between the status quo and hydrogen. Can you give an assurance that you have an open mind about other developing technologies, and that you will not put all your eggs in the hydrogen basket?

Alex Hynes: Yes, absolutely. We are technology agnostic. Obviously, tried and tested technologies come with lower risk, so we are more likely to favour classic electrification over other options. However, to use the example of the far north line, there might be a hybrid option, whereby

we electrify between Inverness and Tain but not north of Tain.

One of the challenges that we are facing is that we are having to make decisions for the next 15 years, based on rapidly evolving technology. Last week, I met a rolling-stock supplier that claims that it can produce a hydrogen train that can operate at 100 miles an hour, which has not been our planning assumption. Things are changing quite rapidly.

Over the next 12 months, we will have to make some firm decisions, rather than put our hope on, for example, battery ranges changing significantly, because we need to crack on and continue the programme of decarbonisation that we have delivered so successfully in the past few years. Look at how we transformed electric services in the central belt with Britain's most reliable new trains, with loads more capacity. We have also cut journey times and improved customer satisfaction. We are looking forward to doing that on other parts of the network.

The Convener: I will try to bring Emma Harper back in, although not to ask the same question. I am afraid that you will have to check the answer in the *Official Report*. If you want to ask a supplementary question, now is your chance.

Emma Harper: Thanks, convener. I apologise—I had to restart everything. I will read the *Official Report* for Alex Hynes's answer, because I missed it all.

I have a wee quick supplementary question. Michael Matheson gave us information when he came to the committee recently about progress towards decarbonising the south-west—for instance, between Stranraer and Ayr. He talked about battery power and hydrogen power. Has any progress been made on that line? On our colourful map, there seems to be a complete lack of rail infrastructure, let alone any decarbonising of the rail infrastructure in the south-west of Scotland. I am wondering whether any progress has been made or whether there are any plans for better connectivity for the south-west in the future.

Alex Hynes: There are two issues there. First, in terms of decarbonising the rail network in the south-west of Scotland, the plans are as they are set out in the document that Transport Scotland published in July. Nothing has changed on that in the past few months.

In terms of general plans for rail investment in the south-west of Scotland, we have clearly made improvements in recent years. For example, we have doubled the frequency of the Dumfries to Carlisle train service. We recognise that there is a clamour for better rail services in the south-west of Scotland, so Transport Scotland is looking at that as part of its regional study into transport in the

whole region. Rail will be an important part of the mix. The south-west of Scotland will get its share of the investment as we decarbonise the railway.

Emma Harper: Thanks, convener.

I am sure that building a bridge to Ireland will not be at the top of the priority list. I would prefer to see improvement on land.

The Convener: Nice try, Emma. I think that your link has broken again. We will move on to the next question.

Angus MacDonald (Falkirk East) (SNP): The Levenmouth rail link got a brief mention earlier; I am sure that we were all delighted to hear the Scottish Government announce in August 2019 that the 5 miles of abandoned railway between Thornton North junction on the Fife circle line and Leven would be rebuilt and reopened. Can we get an update on development of the Levenmouth rail link, including an outline of the project's timetable and expected costs?

Alex Hynes: Yes, of course. We are making brilliant progress on reopening that railway—the Levenmouth reconnected project, as we call it. On the Scotland's Railway website, the public can go to the project portal to see all the information on it. Obviously, we are having to do all our consultation online because of the pandemic.

We are clearing vegetation and doing ground investigation and site investigation. We are also doing the fine detail of the planning in order to make sure that we get siting of the stations correct. I would dearly love to see train services running for December 2023, if at all possible. We also need to think about how we decarbonise the Levenmouth branch. At some point, we will need to electrify it, so we are working through the fine detail of that.

The overall project cost is in the region of £75 million, but that will not be confirmed until we have made final decisions on things such as the siting of stations, the infrastructure and the rolling stock. However, it is green for go on Levenmouth. We are really excited about it.

Angus MacDonald: That is good news. I have nothing more to ask, convener.

The Convener: I think that Jamie Halcro Johnston has some questions.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: I do. Thank you, convener.

First, the Glasgow Queen Street development has been a high-profile one. Can you give us an update on that, and say when you expect it to be finished?

Also, you have touched slightly on Inverness and the Highland main line. Can we get a broader

update on the Highland main line and the Aberdeen to Inverness projects, and how they tie in with the electrification and decarbonisation action plan?

Alex Hynes: Sure. We have nearly finished the £120 million redevelopment of Glasgow Queen Street station. The reason why we are not quite finished is that non-essential construction was stopped during the first lockdown, so we had to suspend construction work. However, we are on site and doing the final bits of the scope. We are weeks away from the end of the Queen Street redevelopment—unless non-essential construction is stopped during the pandemic.

10:00

Members will remember that, a few years ago, Transport Focus determined that Glasgow Queen Street station was literally a building site. That was because it was a building site. It was pleasing recently to see the station win an award for being the best train station in Britain. It has gone from being the worst station in Britain to being the best, and we cannot wait to open it officially—with socially distancing, of course—in the coming months. That is not just a railway project; it marks the end of the Edinburgh to Glasgow line electrification improvement for new trains, and it is already sparking redevelopment of that bit of Glasgow. We are very proud of it.

The Aberdeen to Inverness line project, in which there has been investment of £330 million, is finished. That project has supported an increase in services in the north-east. In the autumn, we opened Kintore station to reconnect that town to the rail network after 56 years.

As part of our decarbonisation programme, the current plan is that we will continuously electrify the network between the central belt and Aberdeen by 2035. The same applies to the Highland main line, from the central belt to Inverness. We are still working through the detail, but we think that electrification of the Aberdeen to Inverness line will come after 2035; we might have to look at hybrid technology to decarbonise that line beyond 2035.

The objective is to decarbonise the whole network by 2035. That does not necessarily mean that we will have electrified the whole network by then, because we are looking at battery electric options, for example.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: I have a couple of follow-up questions. Earlier, you mentioned in response to Edward Mountain the increased costs of running the service and potential delays in passenger numbers improving or getting back to anywhere near normal levels. Given the need for extra investment in Scotland's railways by the

Government, are you confident that that will not lead to future investment projects being curtailed, or is the conversation about that still to be had with the Scottish Government?

You mentioned the delays in the Glasgow Queen Street project because of Covid and the stopping of non-essential work. That is understandable, but has it impacted on other projects elsewhere? I recognise that maintenance will likely have been covered, but have there been problems for investments anywhere else in the network?

Alex Hynes: The decarbonisation action plan was published in July, after the start of the pandemic. That is a Scottish Government commitment to investing in the network to decarbonise it after coronavirus, which is pleasing to see. I cannot see a future for Scotland post pandemic in which the railway is not at the heart of our economic and green recovery, but we are not complacent about that. We recognise that we need to change, adapt and ensure that we are efficient, because the economic cost of coronavirus will have to be met at some point.

You are right. The two primary projects that were affected by the first lockdown and the suspension of non-essential construction were the Queen Street station and Kintore projects. That is why they were opened or finished a little later than we expected. Currently, non-essential construction is allowed, so the Levenmouth project, for example, is proceeding as per the plan.

The railway is classed as critical national infrastructure, so maintenance and renewal are classed as essential. Liam Sumpter, who is the route director of Network Rail Scotland, has been working hard to ensure that, throughout the pandemic, we manage the risks to our people and ensure that works that are essential to run a railway safely and reliably are done. I do not know whether he wants to briefly outline the steps that we have been taking.

Liam Sumpter (Network Rail Scotland): At the start of the pandemic, we identified that a lot of our work fell into the category of essential work and that, to protect our people who were carrying out that work, it would be essential to adjust our practices. We started in March and April by engaging with the trade unions to work out how we could carry out all our maintenance activities, which are essential to keep the rail network running, in a way that ensured social distance for our colleagues.

For example, ordinarily, we would send a team of maybe four to six people in a crew van to undertake work at a site, but that means that people are in very close quarters, so we brought in additional vehicles to allow everyone to drive to

sites separately. Once people are on site, many activities require close contact, so we had to redesign such activities to ensure that they could be done with social distancing measures in mind.

We did all that, and we agreed it all with the trade unions, so we have been able to carry on maintenance and renewal activity throughout the pandemic without any adverse impact on the service. We continue to meet the trade unions weekly to ensure that they continue to be happy with the way in which things are done and that their members are kept safe, so that work can continue.

As yet, there has been no disruption to our ability to undertake maintenance and renewals, which is positive. Of course, we keep an eye on infection rates, to see whether we have a spike in a particular depot that might affect production. We encourage our people to follow all the guidelines while they are at work and when they are away from work to ensure that critical infrastructure activities are not affected.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: Thank you both for your answers.

The Convener: Some members want to ask short follow-up questions. I will bring in the deputy convener first.

Maureen Watt: We have spoken about the Williams review and the white paper that is expected. Do people in the industry have intel on when we can expect the white paper? I understand that it will have to be reviewed in light of Covid and climate change targets.

Alex Hynes: I will not speculate; what I know is only what is on the record, which is that Chris Heaton-Harris, the rail minister at Westminster, said in December that he hoped that it would be published within the next six weeks. That would take us to the end of January. Whether we see the white paper then is another matter. The UK Government clearly has its hands full managing the coronavirus pandemic, and although the structure of the railways is important, we are in the middle of a national emergency. The honest answer is that I do not know.

Maureen Watt: Is there an update on the high speed 2 project? Has there been or will there be discussion about more rapid roll-out further north?

Alex Hynes: HS2 is happening. It is under construction, with tunnelling under way in the Chilterns. It is a project that we support.

Transport Scotland is looking at how Scotland might spend Barnett consequentials that arise from HS2. It is a big, expensive and transformational project that will bring high speed to Scotland, and Barnett consequentials might flow to the Scottish Government, too. Work is under

way on very long-term plans to consider what we could do between Edinburgh and the border and Glasgow and the border, to speed up services and improve capacity.

For instance, do we need a new alignment of the railway between the border and Edinburgh Waverley that is a bit more direct, rather than going round the coast? The railway between Glasgow and the border is primarily two track, which means that we have freight, local services and inter-city services all trying to use the same track. Should we add more four-track sections to that bit of the network so that we can speed up inter-city services while delivering great local services? Those are some of the very long-term plans that we are looking at. They go much further into the future. Our focus right now is on recovering the revenue and decarbonising our network but, clearly, we have an eye to cross-border transport developments, too.

Emma Harper: I hope that my own network will stick during my question this time.

On the back of Maureen Watt's question, I note that Sir Peter Hendy is conducting a review of connectivity across the United Kingdom, and the High Speed Rail Group outlined seven projects that it thinks should be put on the to-do list. Has ScotRail been asked about that review, or have you fed into it? Would we ultimately want the UK Government to pay for any massive infrastructure improvements if connectivity is to improve across the UK?

Alex Hynes: We have engaged with the union connectivity review, both directly with Sir Peter Hendy, who is the chairman of Network Rail, and through the CBI, with which we work very closely here in Scotland. I saw the High Speed Rail Group's proposals and read them with interest.

We are taking part to advise and assist but, as you know better than anybody, the decision will be made between the UK and Scottish Governments. We are there in an advisory capacity rather than a decision-making one, and we look forward to seeing the output of the review when it is published.

Colin Smyth: We have discussed reductions in services quite a lot during the pandemic. A new ScotRail timetable came into effect on 13 December, with significant reductions in services. You anticipated that that was likely to be the timetable that would, we hope, take us to some sort of upturn in passenger numbers in several months' time. Over the past few days, however, there have been further cuts in services almost out of the blue—namely, between Glasgow and Stranraer. Is that just a short-term reduction in service or is it now part of the revised timetable?

Are there plans that we do not know about to reduce any other services?

Alex Hynes: We are actively considering further reductions to the train service, because demand has fallen back to 10 per cent of normal. We are literally working on that at the moment. Is there an opportunity to operate shorter trains and still provide space for physical distancing, and is there an opportunity to operate fewer train services? At the moment, we are operating about 80 per cent of train services for about 10 per cent of the demand, which is not good value for money for the taxpayer. Further train service reductions are under consideration.

On the specific example in the south-west to which you refer, the timetable changes that we have had to make recently go back to the timetable that we were operating in the summer. As well as dealing with the issues of passenger demand and space for physical distancing and the need to ensure that we deliver good value for money for taxpayers, we need to tweak the timetable in some pockets of the network to ensure that we can resource it properly. In the south-west, we have quite a lot of manual signal boxes and, because a relatively high number of our people there are shielding because of coronavirus, we have had to change signal-box opening times, which has affected the timetable. That is the background behind those latest changes in the south-west.

Operating fewer services and shorter trains is under active consideration, as 90 per cent of our passenger usage has vanished because of the coronavirus restrictions.

The Convener: Richard Lyle has the last question.

Richard Lyle: While I have the opportunity, I want to ask Liam Sumpter about weather precautions. Some areas of Scotland have recently experienced snow and icy conditions in the past few weeks and there are predictions of another beast from the east. What steps is Network Rail taking to ensure that points are not frozen and that snowfall does not affect our railway?

Liam Sumpter: Thank you for the question. You are right that we have had some very cold weather. Last week, the temperatures dropped to -15° on some parts of the rail network and, as you will know, some of our infrastructure—signalling, in particular—is Victorian technology that is not designed to operate in those sorts of conditions.

We have two principal areas of concern. The first is points which, as you say, can become frozen due to the volume of snow that falls around the moving parts of the infrastructure, or blocked so that they cannot move freely. The second is

manual signalling cables, which can literally become frozen because they are very old technology.

We install heating at almost every set of points. Special components trigger when the temperature drops below freezing, turning on a heating element and keeping the points clear of snow. Even that technology, which helps to prevent snow from being a problem, can become overwhelmed in very heavy snow. That happened a couple of weeks ago in Lanark, where we had what was referred to as thundersnow. So much snow was dumped in such a short time that we could not protect the points. In those circumstances, we send out teams proactively to shovel snow out of points as it falls or to use technology similar to leaf blowers to clear the points. Critical to getting that right is accurate understanding of the forecast, so that we know where the snow is going to fall. That is a real challenge for us and we are working through it at the moment with MetDesk, which provides our weather forecast.

The second problem that I referenced is the freezing of signal cables. That is a challenge for us, because they are literally cables that are attached to a lever in a signal box and run all the way out to the signalling equipment. For those, we need to apply something called Kilfroast, which is a bit like the de-icer that you put on your car in the morning, across the miles and miles of signalling cables to try to keep them moving freely. When we get notification that there is likely to be heavy snowfall, we get teams out applying the Kilfroast in advance to try to keep all the equipment moving.

We saw some disruption last week because it was just so cold; it was unusually cold. Current forecasts for at least the next 10 days are for temperatures to drop as low as -5° or -6° in some areas, but that is well within the manageable level with the additional mitigations that I have articulated. If we see a new beast from the east, that will cause us additional challenges. When large levels of snow accumulate at high parts of the network and then melt, that cascades on to the network and causes a flooding risk. We have to manage that accordingly, by putting in things such as speed restrictions to make sure that we keep the railway safe while the weather subsides.

I hope that that gives you a flavour of the things that we do to try to introduce resilience.

Richard Lyle: That is excellent. I compliment your staff on what they do.

The Convener: It would be fair to ask Alex Hynes whether he wants to add anything regarding the operation of stations and his services in cold weather.

Alex Hynes: A big part of our performance improvement has come from the way in which we

manage the weather. Our summer performance was 80 per cent better than it was two years ago because we are investing record amounts in making the network more resilient. We delivered our best—or nearly best—autumn performance because we had our biggest autumn plan ever. We are spending more money on the shop floor of our railway to make it more resilient to the weather that we are now seeing.

Climate change adaptation has become a big part of our activity. It is Network Rail's responsibility to manage the infrastructure, and in the five-year control-period window to 2024, we have 22 per cent more money to spend on the operation, maintenance and renewal of the railway infrastructure. About a third of that is specifically targeted at making the network more resilient to climate change, which we are seeing. Every month is either the hottest, the wettest, the driest or the coldest. Our climate is becoming less temperate and we need to adjust our railway accordingly.

The Convener: That brings us to the end of our questions. I thank the witnesses for appearing at the meeting to give evidence. I am sure that the committee will further discuss rail services with the cabinet secretary when the opportunity arises in the coming weeks.

Our meeting next week will be in the morning and will be an evidence session on the Scottish Government's climate change plan with the United Kingdom Committee on Climate Change. There will also be a substantial amount of subordinate legislation to look at.

Thank you all for attending. That concludes this morning's committee business and I therefore close the meeting.

Meeting closed at 10:21.

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