

Public consultation on proposed new ScotRail timetables

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ScotRail is unveiling plans for new timetables from May 2022, showing that it is 'Fit For The Future'.

It's part of a public consultation, as customers return to using Scotland's Railway.

It comes almost 18 months after Scotland went into its first COVID-19 lockdown, leading to the worst financial crisis the rail industry has experienced as passenger numbers dropped by 90 per cent.

ScotRail has been able to continue to operate during the pandemic thanks to significant financial support of more than £400million in the form of Emergency Measures Agreements from the Scottish Government.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the train operator responded to shifting travel patterns and demand as lockdown restrictions were revised and adjusted.

ScotRail made twelve timetable changes during a period when normally there would only be three, giving the train operator concrete evidence upon which to base its timetables going forward.

There has been a gradual increase in the number of customers returning to the railway due to the easing, and now the ending, of the majority of coronavirus restrictions.

Passenger journeys have risen to around 50 per cent of their pre-COVID levels, however, evidence shows that, in future, customers will be using the railway in different ways by travelling at different times and for different purposes.

Transport Focus research shows how much value customers place on a dependable service. ScotRail's punctuality has improved significantly over the last year, and we aim to maintain this improvement in our new timetables.

The train operator is proposing a new, better performing, timetable operating around 2,100 services per weekday as the foundation to encourage a return to public transport following the pandemic. Most customers will find the number of calls at their station and the destinations served are similar to today. However, there are some areas where there is greater change, which is being done for several important reasons.

ScotRail analysis shows prior to the pandemic, on a number of routes across the country, significantly more seats were being provided than were required for the number of passengers travelling.

For example, under five and a half million passenger journey miles were completed on a typical weekday, which was just 23 per cent of the available number of seats. In other words, seats were empty for 77 per cent of the distance that was travelled.

Returning to a pre-pandemic timetable would result in trains operating 26 million more vehicle miles each year for little customer benefit. As well as increased emissions, that would increase ScotRail costs to the taxpayer by £30million to £40million each year.

The proposed new timetable will also focus on improved punctuality and reliability of services, building on the record punctuality delivered during the pandemic. Research from Transport Focus has highlighted this is a key priority for customers.

New services are being added on some routes, such as Dundee to Glasgow which will benefit from an hourly service calling at all stations between Dundee and Stirling.

On other routes there may be slightly longer journey times, as it is more efficient to operate one long train calling at all stations, than have two shorter ones which split the calls between them, for example between Kirkcaldy and Edinburgh. Many routes will see little change compared to the current timetable.

As the country comes out of the pandemic, the railway industry has an opportunity to take control of operating costs and build a greener, more sustainable railway for the future.

The proposed new customer focused timetable will reflect predicted levels of service as well as the need to provide the best value for money for taxpayers. ScotRail said the proposals are a new starting point, and in the future, new methods of analysis developed during COVID-19 will refine and improve the service offer

as the operator learns more about how customer travel behaviours are changing.

As Scotland works towards becoming a net-zero society, ScotRail will continue to work with the Scottish Government to ensure that rail can play its part in decarbonising Scotland's transport network.

Alex Hynes, Scotland's Railway Managing Director, said: "Scotland's Railway is committed to delivering a service that is safe, reliable, green, and clean. Our job is to keep people moving and connected to business, leisure, and education while meeting the expectations of our customers.

"The pandemic has changed how people travel across all of Scotland so our services will reflect these varied travel patterns and deliver timetables that are reliable, have enough capacity to meet pre-COVID levels of demand, and are sustainable.

"We are consulting on the timetable changes being proposed and we would welcome the views of our customers."

David Simpson, ScotRail Operations Director, said: "The significant cost of running the railway following the impact of the coronavirus pandemic means it's essential that the railway meets the changing needs of customers, as well as provides the taxpayer with best value for money. Our timetable proposals do that.

"That might mean offering a different service on different days of the week or different times of year as passenger demand varies across the week or through the year. But by doing so, we can ensure Scotland's Railway remains sustainable into the future.

"During the pandemic, we've provided outstanding, and sustained, high levels of punctuality and reliability for those travelling. Our proposals build on that as we know that a safe and reliable service is a top priority for customers."

Graeme Dey MSP, Minister for Transport, said: "Organisations up and down the country are reflecting on how they can provide great customer service while at the same time ensuring their businesses are fit for the future.

"Rail is no different and that is why it is essential ScotRail review changes in travel patterns across Scotland so that timetables best meet demand.

"This consultation exercise offers a real opportunity for customers and businesses to help shape a reliable and responsive timetable change from May 2022.

"I would encourage anyone with an interest to share their views."

Robert Samson, Stakeholder Manager, Transport Focus, said: "The timetable is ScotRail's basic promise to its passengers, and as passengers we want a reliable railway that delivers on the promise of the timetable day in and day out.

"The significant improvement in punctuality achieved over the last year must be maintained in the

proposed timetable.

“We welcome the opportunity that the public consultation affords to allow passengers who depend on delivery of the timetable to comment and make their views known on the proposals to inform the final content of the timetable, ensuring it is focused on the passenger.”

The consultation is open from 20 August to 1 October 2021, to seek opinions on the proposed timetables.

The ScotRail website, <https://www.scotrail.co.uk/fit-for-the-future>, has more information and includes a link to a survey where customers and communities can give their views.

Photo credit: ScotRail