

What next for Stranraer?

David Spaven assesses the post-ferry position

On 20 November 2011, after 134 years of rail-sea connection, the last Northern Ireland ferry left Stranraer harbour for Belfast. The next morning, Stena's shipping service resumed from the rail-less former military port at Cairnryan, seven miles up Loch Ryan and that much closer to Northern Ireland. Ferry 'foot passengers' are now bussed from

electric train services at Ayr, so – with half of all rail passengers at Stranraer in recent years being ferry connectors – the 59 route miles south of Ayr have lost a core market overnight.

Where does that leave this outpost of the Scottish rail network? The media in Scotland have not been slow to latch on to the predictable 'closure threat' angle, but others have seen the

new market opportunities which a decoupling of the rail and ferry timetables could create for the railway.

The timetable

The route and its operations were described in some detail in the April 2008 issue of *Modern Railways*. Despite difficult geography south of Ayr, Stranraer-Glasgow trains have offered relatively competitive journey times when operated (with just six intermediate stops) via the traditional Paisley route – currently

a fastest time of 2hr 9min for the 101-mile journey.

Compared to the loosely comparable termini at Oban (population 8,000) and Fort William (10,000), Stranraer with a population of 11,000 could regard itself as having a generous volume of train services – seven arrivals and seven departures daily until the December 2011 timetable change. However, the line's timetable has long been the most complex and irregular in Scotland, reflecting in part the need to connect with ferries. The other major constraint on timetabling – and this remains a key driver – is the resourcing of the service around off-peak availability of Class 156 units otherwise deployed on peak-hour suburban commuter services at Glasgow Central.

The circuitous through services from Stranraer/Girvan to Carlisle/Newcastle disappeared in the



2009 timetable recast, but oddities remained, with no fewer than three departures and three arrivals after 19.00 at Stranraer. This peculiarity was part of the reason that Network Rail could state in its Initial Industry Plan Scotland (published in 2011) that 'the average loading between Girvan and Stranraer is only 11 passengers per train'.

The December 2011 timetable began the process of recasting services to meet the line's new circumstances. One of the poorly patronised evening trains at Stranraer was withdrawn in each direction, and the spacing of trains has been marginally improved, albeit still leaving five- and four-hour afternoon gaps in the Down and Up timetables respectively. More positively for Stranraer rail users, all three daily through trains to Glasgow are now operated via the faster Paisley route, with just one of the balancing workings

returning via the longer Kilmarnock route.

Girvan and Maybole – where commuting and other markets increase – have benefitted from a significant boost in service frequency on the northern section of the line. An additional three trains in each direction have brought the daily timetable up to a total of 15 arrivals and 15 departures – with trains originating or terminating in Ayr, Kilmarnock or Glasgow. Unfortunately, regular-interval operation north of Girvan is not possible without infrastructure improvements over the single track to Dalrymple Junction, south of Ayr.

New markets

While the Stranraer line has long been the Cinderella of the Scottish network, the impending shift of the Belfast ferries has prompted growing debate about the railway's future. In 2009 the Ayr-Stranraer rail

regeneration study was completed by the writer's Deltix Transport Consulting on behalf of Transform Scotland (the sustainable transport alliance), Passenger Focus and the two regional transport partnerships straddling the line – Strathclyde Partnership for Transport and SWestrans. Key conclusions of the Deltix report were as follows:

- The line had been neglected due to:
 - (a) its physical isolation from other rural Scottish rail routes;
 - (b) the traditional focus on only its ferry market; and
 - (c) the lack of a cross-boundary and cross-sector line partnership to promote its regeneration.
- There was no single panacea for the regeneration of the railway; instead a wide range of route corridor and location-specific measures could help secure increased

patronage and net revenue, and improved economic, social and environmental value.

The report noted that 'the route traverses attractive countryside and has the potential to tap into a significant market for day leisure trips from the Glasgow area to visitor attractions in southern Ayrshire and western Galloway'. Deltix recommended that at least three fast through trains should be retained each way daily between Glasgow and Stranraer and via Paisley – timed to serve new markets for shopping and leisure travel, not least the scope for packaged 'Days Out', emulating long-established integrated ticketing deals between ScotRail, bus/ferry operators and visitor attractions in other parts of Scotland.

In the December 2011 timetable, a tentative start to tapping such

Unit No 156478 is seen south of Maybole on 10 April 2010 on the 11.05 Kilmarnock-Girvan service. Ian Lothian



markets began with the re-orientation of through Glasgow-Stranraer services towards the faster Paisley route and the introduction of an 09.41 direct train from the city to Galloway's only railway station. However, the remaining long gap between return services from Stranraer (14.43 to 19.08) means the new train can fulfil only part of its potential.

So how can the afternoon gap be filled without diverting train sets away from their evening peak duties in and around Glasgow? A possible answer began to emerge in discussions between the writer and ScotRail's Head of Planning & Development, Jerry Farquharson, as part of the research for the 2009 report. Mr Farquharson pointed out that units for peak strengthening were not required on Saturdays and Sundays, and that the Friday evening peak was much more spread out than on Mondays to Thursdays – so why not devise a timetable which more closely reflects supply and demand variations through the week? The Deltix report built on this insight and also recommended a summer Saturdays through service from Edinburgh to Stranraer (exploiting the link between the Royal Botanic Garden in the capital and its out-station at Logan Botanic Garden, 15 miles south of Stranraer) – a possibility which ScotRail has recently been investigating.

Bus-rail integration

A crucial strand of rail regeneration is tackling the lack of bus-rail integration at Stranraer. Since the 1965 closure of the Town station,

local people have faced a taxi ride or a long, windswept and traffic-dominated walk from the town centre, there being no bus services to the Harbour station. Some 10 years ago Dumfries & Galloway Council (D&GC) obtained Public Transport Fund funding from the then Scottish Executive towards the cost of a new Public Transport Interchange (PTI). This would involve relocating the station around a third of a mile closer to the town, occupying a prominent public site adjacent to the A77 Cairnryan Road, and thereby helping to raise the profile of train services which have been largely 'out of sight, out of mind'.

The need to utilise part of the Stena terminal's operational footprint for the PTI has delayed progress on the project, and there is now a funding gap – which could be filled from economic regeneration funds. Some local concerns were expressed that the station relocation would limit the scope to develop charter train operations on the line, but the latest design produced for D&GC includes – as well as a single platform long enough to accommodate a two-car plus a four-car Class 156 train – a platform road and associated rounding loop of sufficient length for a 10-coach loco-hauled train.

Route infrastructure options

Some rationalisation of the line's infrastructure seems inevitable if costs are to be contained within the context of political pressure to reduce the ScotRail franchise bill. The 38-mile stretch between Girvan and Stranraer is one of the last in

Scotland to be operated by the electric token block system, with semaphore signals and manual signal boxes at all four crossing loops.

A radical proposal emerged in 2011 from Ayrshire-based consultant Alan Wood, whose Stranraer to Ayr Rail Regeneration Study (STARRS) recommended electrification from Ayr to Girvan, at a projected cost of around £35million – with same-platform interchange at Girvan to a Stranraer diesel shuttle, operating every two hours with a single two-car Class 156. Mr Wood's report tacitly acknowledges the interchange penalty – particularly if new leisure travellers are to be attracted to rail – by noting that at least one service daily would need to work through daily to Glasgow (with a balancing return working) for fuelling and maintenance:

'Ideally these would be timed to serve key existing and/or potential new markets such as leisure day trips from Glasgow to Stranraer (linked to connecting bus services to attractions such as Portpatrick and the Logan Botanic Garden).'

Mr Wood's notional timetable would in theory remove the need for any signalling south of Girvan – operating the Stranraer extension on a 'one train working' basis – but to maintain some operational flexibility (including the ability to handle charter trains and any future freight) his report suggests that a loop should be retained at Glenwhilly (close to the half-way point between Girvan and Stranraer)

or mothballed for use only when required for additional traffic.

Alan Wood argues that electrification 'will reduce operating costs whilst increasing passenger numbers and route revenue', but how high up the Scottish pecking order for electrification investment Girvan would come, remains to be seen – and a strategy for the whole line's regeneration needs to be put in place long before the wires could go up.

SAYLSA – and a line partnership?

The STARRS report concentrates on 'hard' issues like infrastructure but does not claim to address the 'soft' aspects of running a successful rural railway. This is an area where the SAYLSA support group has a number of achievements. The Stranraer to Ayr Line Support Association was formed in 2007 as a community-led initiative 'with the aim of developing services and facilities for this historic railway as well as helping to secure its long-term future'. SAYLSA has adopted Maybole, Girvan, Barrhill and Stranraer stations under ScotRail's 'Adopt a Station' scheme and also has its own shop at Girvan station.

An unidentified Saltire liveried Class 156 is seen as it approaches Maybole with the 16.32 Girvan-Kilmarnock service on 13 February 2010. Ian Lothian

Loco No 37423 runs alongside the sea at Stranraer on 4 April 2010. The loco had earlier arrived with a railtour and was on a positioning move prior to its return; Stranraer Harbour signalbox, which is normally closed out of use, had to be specially opened for the shunting. Ian Lothian



The group has produced station-specific and line pocket guides, and undertook a survey of nearly 2,000 people – both existing and potential rail users – as part of a 2010-11 project supported by the Scottish Government's Climate Challenge Fund. SAYLSA now also has a 'Barrhill Community Rail Bus' funded with contributions from the Ayrshire LEADER programme, Barrhill Community Interest Company, Carrick Futures and South Ayrshire Council.

SAYLSA styles itself as a community rail partnership, but unlike the typical CRP in England or Wales, it has no paid staff nor a formal partnership arrangement including, for example, the regional transport partnerships (RTPs), local authorities or Network Rail. Previous attempts by Transform Scotland and others to persuade Transport Scotland (the Scottish Government agency) to back CRPs north of the Border foundered on scepticism about the relevance of the 'typical English branch line' to Scotland.

Now, however, there is a growing consensus within the rail industry and the wider rail lobby that Ayr-Stranraer requires the focus of a formal and properly-

funded CRP, bringing together all the key players in the public, private and community sectors to drive forward a strategy for the regeneration of the line. Nigel Wunsch, Network Rail's Planning & Development Manager Scotland comments: 'A Community Rail Partnership would be a good idea. Our community rail team would be delighted to work with an active and successful community rail group working with relevant local authorities and RTPs to develop opportunities.'

Referring to the many rail improvements secured by the Partnership Manager for HITRANS, the regional transport partnership for the Highlands, Jerry Farquharson of ScotRail puts it simply: 'What we need is a Frank Roach!'

Determining the future

In 2006 Scotland's Railways was published, setting out Scottish Ministers' vision for the rail network over the next 20 years. On rural railways, the document notes that 'without development, these routes will fail to attract new customers and costs will remain high' and that 'promoting social inclusion is a driver in these areas



The driver of unit No 156436 prepares to hand the token for the Barrhill-Girvan section to the signalman at Girvan on 12 February 2011. The train was forming the 12.36 Stranraer-Glasgow Central service. Ian Lothian

as is economic growth through tourism'. That neatly sums up the prognosis for the Ayr-Stranraer line.

Much as the media may love to run closure scare stories, it does seem highly unlikely that politicians would risk the public opprobrium of proposing the withdrawal of passenger services to Stranraer. The Scottish Government's agency, Transport Scotland, is adamant that it has no plans for closure but

instead wants to see the line re-gearred to a cost-effective timetable to meet local and tourist needs – and Transport Minister Keith Brown gave an 'absolute commitment' on the future of rail services to Stranraer during a visit to the town in early January. It is clear, however, that without positive intervention by the public sector, the railway south of Girvan faces a minimalist, cost-driven future. **mr**

