



**Ayr-Stranraer rail regeneration study**  
June 2009 summary report

Deltix Transport Consulting  
for Transform Scotland







# Ayr-Stranraer rail regeneration study: June 2009 summary report

Written by David Spaven of Deltix Transport Consulting for Transform Scotland

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## Introduction

### Background:

The planned switch of ferry services from Stranraer to Cairnryan creates the opportunity for the first time in the Ayr-Stranraer railway's history to gear the train service to the needs of local users, leisure visitors and tourists, rather than through-travellers from Scotland to Northern Ireland.

In December 2007 Transform Scotland, the campaign for sustainable transport, commissioned Deltix Transport Consulting to undertake the *Ayr-Stranraer Rail Regeneration study*. The study has been funded by Passenger Focus, Strathclyde Partnership for Transport ('SPT') and the South West of Scotland Transport Partnership ('SWestrans').

The study was both desk and field based. 28 organisations represented by more than 40 individuals were consulted – in the rail industry, central & local government and agencies, and other public, private and NGO organisations.

### Context – national:

The Scottish Government's agency, Transport Scotland, now has responsibility for the majority of rail powers in Scotland, enabling it to plan future services and target investment.

In December 2006 'Scotland's Railways' was published, setting out Scottish Ministers' vision for the rail network over the next 20 years. For rural routes, 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 as is economic growth through tourism".

National and regional rail policies are required to contribute to the current Scottish Government's Strategic Objectives for Scotland. Regional Transport Strategy outcomes also have to contribute to the Scottish Government's required National Outcomes for transport, namely (i) improved connectivity, (ii) access for all, (iii) reduced emissions, and (iv) attractive, seamless, reliable travel

### Context – wider transport trends:

While this study is primarily concerned with the short to medium term regeneration of the Ayr-Stranraer railway, a key concern for Transform Scotland is the potential impact of major global environmental and resource threats – in particular climate change and oil depletion – including their economic implications.

These wider trends may bring substantial changes to the competitive circumstances surrounding the Ayr-Stranraer railway in the medium to long term. Given that passenger and freight trains (when well loaded) are much more energy-efficient than competing modes of overland transport, future market and policy responses to these challenges are likely to contribute to a potentially bigger and more strategic role for the railway in a future low-carbon economy.

### **The Ayr-Stranraer railway today:**

Since the line through to Stranraer Harbour opened in 1877, the railway's primary function has been to link the Northern Ireland ferries with Glasgow. Even now – in the face of the hitherto inexorable rise of competition from low-priced airlines, the coach and the car – more than 50% of rail passengers at Stranraer are ferry travellers.

End-to-end journey times vary significantly between Glasgow and Stranraer, essentially due to the different operating capabilities of the two routes between Glasgow and Ayr – the 'traditional' well-aligned and faster double track route via Paisley, and the more recently utilised, largely single-track, and slower route via Kilmarnock.

ScotRail undertake sample counts of train passengers at various (non-peak) times of the year. Analysis of available statistics from 2007 allows some key patterns of patronage to be deduced:

- the large majority of trains arriving at or departing from Stranraer convey less than 40 passengers
- the pattern of patronage at Stranraer peaks heavily at weekends, with typically 'trainload' quantities of passengers (80 or more) on key Saturday and Sunday trains.

The Ayr-Stranraer service has remained unchanged since 1996, but Transport Scotland, ScotRail and Network Rail are planning for an interim timetable recast in late 2009. This has been prompted by improvements to the Glasgow-Kilmarnock service resulting from the current redoubling of five miles of track from Lugton to Stewarton on the otherwise single-track route between Barrhead and Kilmarnock.

### **The Stranraer to Ayr Line Support Association ('SAYLSA'):**

SAYLSA was launched as a volunteer support group for the line in September 2007, and has already organised a variety of events to raise awareness of the railway and encourage greater use by local people. The group has worked in conjunction with ScotRail to produce a new 'windowgazer' guide to lineside attractions and the distinctive features of the line.

After an absence of 20 years, the station shop at Girvan has been re-opened by SAYLSA, with the support of South Ayrshire Council and ScotRail. The shop is open every Saturday morning and sells refreshments and souvenirs.

A partnership between SAYLSA, the National Autistic Society's Daldorch House School and ScotRail has seen the school make 10 planters for Girvan station and fill them with shrubs, which the students tend as part of their curriculum. Planters have also been provided for Barrhill station, with the Network Rail signallers undertaking the maintenance.

## Strengths and weaknesses

### Strengths of the line:

Research for this study suggests that the Ayr-Stranraer route has a number of key strengths, including:

- a competitive speed versus coach and car – with fastest journeys of 2h 7m (48mph average) – on through trains from Stranraer to Glasgow via Paisley
- timetabled ferry connections are relatively good on Mondays to Saturdays, with trains connecting into 3 out of 4 foot passenger ferries Monday-Friday in each direction, and 4 out of 5 on Saturdays
- on-train and station staff have a reputation for being friendly and attentive to passenger needs
- 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.

### Weaknesses of the line:

The line has some significant weaknesses including:

- the timetable is the most complex and irregular in Scotland (only in part due to ferry timings), with gaps of up to 5 hours at Stranraer
- the timetable does not adequately cater for the (domestic) Stranraer area to Glasgow day trip market
- the timetable does not cater at all for the Glasgow to western Galloway day trip leisure market
- the Stranraer line has not enjoyed the benefits of the 'partnership' approach for the rural Highland network, which has typically produced £1m funding each year for the region's rail system.

As a result of the above and other factors – notably competition from low-priced airlines between Belfast and Prestwick / Glasgow – the route is poorly patronised, with typically around 500 passengers a day (Monday-Friday) on 24 trains with a total seating capacity of 3,480 people, i.e. an average of 21 people per train, each of which has a minimum capacity of 145 seats.

## Opportunities

### Developing new passenger business:

There are three key reasons why it is important to develop new passenger business for the railway:

- the railway (particularly south of Girvan) and its train services are substantially underutilised
- the railway has unrealised potential to fulfil a bigger economic, social and environmental role, in line with regional and national policy objectives
- the anticipated Stena relocation will remove a significant minority of the line's passengers, at least south of Girvan.

There is no single panacea, but rather a range of measures to secure the regeneration of the railway, falling broadly into the following categories:

- new markets, marketing and branding opportunities
- timetable recast opportunities
- stations and rail-bus / rail-ferry integration opportunities.

### New markets, marketing & branding opportunities:

From an inbound leisure market perspective, the Ayr-Stranraer line offers a journey of great variety 'over the hills' through attractive scenery, traversing virtually roadless country south of Barrhill to the Luce Valley.

The railway itself is of interest, and not just for rail enthusiasts:

- Girvan has Scotland's only surviving Art Deco style station building, dating from 1951 after a fire destroyed the previous structure
- Barrhill is Scotland's last traditional rural station with a staffed signal box
- Stranraer is Britain's oldest working harbour station.

The railway also offers existing or potential access to a variety of visitor attractions in southern Ayrshire and the Rhins and Machars of Galloway, either directly or by means of integrated rail-bus connections (with associated rail-bus-entrance integrated tickets) – including Glenluce Abbey, Culzean Castle, Logan Botanic Gardens, Mull of Galloway Lighthouse & Visitor Centre, the Southern Upland Way and the Carrick Way.

The south west coast of Scotland is renowned for its mild climate and associated garden attractions featuring exotic plants, and the recent initiatives to develop station gardens at Girvan and Barrhill provide a potential theme for the line, reflecting the character of the route itself and the countryside to which it gives access.

### Timetable recast opportunities:

It is widely agreed that there are significant opportunities to recast the Stranraer line timetable, which has remained virtually unchanged for 13 years – a period during which markets have changed significantly. Rail should concentrate on what it can or could do best, i.e.:

- connecting with Northern Ireland ferry services (initially at Stranraer, but following Stena relocation potentially via a Cairnryan-Girvan Station integrated bus link)

- providing attractive services from Greater Glasgow and Ayrshire to southern Ayrshire and Stranraer, integrated with bus/coach links to key visitor attractions
- providing attractive services from Stranraer / Girvan to Ayr and Glasgow, including the important intermediate stations at Kilmarnock, Paisley and Irvine.

Given the impenetrability of the current irregular timetable, an evident priority must be to create more consistent departure times and to fill some of the long gaps between departures. It appears important – resources permitting – to incorporate at least three fast through trains each way Mondays to Saturdays between Stranraer and Glasgow via Paisley in the new timetable. Without these it will be more difficult for rail to retain existing passengers and penetrate key new markets.

Edinburgh is already – despite the lack of through trains to Stranraer, Girvan (or indeed Ayr) – the fifth largest source of rail journeys south of Ayr. Given its population size and large tourism base, and the linkage between the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh and Logan Botanic Garden, there is a case for examining the scope for a summer Saturdays through service from Edinburgh to Ayr, Girvan and Stranraer.

As the train connects with only 4 out of 10 foot passenger ferries on Sundays, and trains do not currently serve the Glasgow-Galloway or Glasgow-Girvan day trip markets, there is scope for summer Sunday service enhancement, perhaps one extra round trip between Glasgow and Stranraer.

There is wide agreement that the aspiration for Girvan should be to secure an hourly regular-interval service to Ayr, with different views of the priority destinations beyond Ayr. Unfortunately, with the current infrastructure, a running time of 27 minutes from Ayr to Girvan is just too long to secure an out-and-back service within one hour. Until such time as infrastructure investment can be justified to reduce the running time, the most realistic aspiration for Girvan may be to fill some of the key gaps in the timetable.

#### **Stations & rail-bus integration opportunities:**

The major planned station change is at Stranraer, where Dumfries & Galloway Council has obtained Public Transport Fund funding from the Scottish Government towards the cost of a new Public Transport Interchange (PTI). This was predicated on the relocation of Stena to a terminal at Cairnryan, as the footprint of the planned PTI encompasses operational Stena land.

The PTI and associated park-and-ride facilities are long overdue – there is no road-rail integration and the current station is a long, windswept and traffic-dominated walk from the town centre. The PTI will offer modern facilities and will occupy a prominent public site adjacent to Cairnryan Road, helping to raise the profile of rail services.

It will also transform the opportunities for integration, using both scheduled bus services and some selected bespoke services for 'Days Out' packages. Some initial pump-priming may be required to establish such services, for example on Sundays when there are very few scheduled buses (but, as a result, plenty of spare bus and driver capacity), and to destinations which currently have no scheduled bus services, such as the Mull of Galloway Visitor Centre.

There may be an opportunity to create a new station directly serving Glenluce Abbey (which lies just a third of a mile from the railway) and the wider Dunragit / Glenluce / Machars area. The Abbey is a 4-star rated Historic Scotland attraction which draws 3,000 visitors annually – however, it has recently been closed in winter as it is perceived as being off the beaten track.

Barrhill, as the last traditional staffed rural station in Scotland, has the potential to attract more visitors, including a potential return of the Royal Scotsman luxury train. A partnership approach involving the rail industry, local government, local business (including timber and stone workers), SAYLSA and community organisations could fully restore the rural charm of the station and provide improved passenger facilities.

Girvan is already an impressive station, but there is scope to make more of it, including further planting work and utilisation of empty rooms for business / community activities.

A start to the improvement of Maybole station has been made with platform planters, but more could be done to raise the station to a level of attraction commensurate with the opportunities identified for other stations on the line.

### **Developing a partnership:**

Partnership in its widest sense is a well-established aspect of railway development, with the rail industry, the public sector, local businesses and community organisations coming together in various combinations to facilitate new stations, additional services, publicity, etc. In recent years, ScotRail has established an 'Adopt a Station' initiative nationally, and locally has worked with SAYLSA to facilitate station enhancements at Girvan and Barrhill. Earlier this year, Transport Scotland and ScotRail launched the £1m Station Community Regeneration Fund to encourage more business and community use of disused station buildings.

Community Rail Partnerships – which have been widely developed in England and Wales – have been very effective in working with local partners to raise awareness of their lines and have secured external funding for projects, including station improvements and extra train services, allowing services to better meet local needs. They go beyond a simple 'transport' agenda and link into wider strategies for accessibility, rural regeneration, social inclusion and sustainable tourism.

In the case of the Stranraer line, there appear to be broadly two options in terms of the model which might be developed to bring key stakeholders together, with the objective of regenerating the railway and its wider role in the southern Ayrshire and western Galloway corridor, namely either:

- 1) SAYLSA forms the partnership body, with commercial and statutory agencies (and cross-boundary sustainability projects) joining its Executive Committee to develop a programme of initiatives for the line, or
- 2) A separately constituted rail partnership is established, potentially led by one or both of the regional transport partnerships, and encompassing all the key stakeholders, including representation from SAYLSA.

Ideally, a part-time (perhaps one or two days per week) Development Officer would be funded by a range of parties working within the structure of the regional transport partnerships and based in either Girvan or Stranraer.

### **Developing new freight business:**

There has been no regular freight traffic on the Stranraer line since 1994. However, with the wider national resurgence of rail freight (including its penetration of supermarket supply chains) and growing concerns about climate change and oil depletion, there has been a revival of interest in prospects for new rail freight business between Ayr and Stranraer, including an Ireland-Galloway-Forth Estuary-Mainland Europe 'rail landbridge'.

At this stage it is not clear who would lead a landbridge project. Some infrastructure works would be required – both to upgrade a number of weak underbridges and potentially to raise the clearance for 9'6" high and other tall containers to be conveyed on standard wagons through tunnels and overbridges. As the Stranraer line is TEN-T (Trans European Network) designated, upgrading work might attract EU funding, and the growing dialogue between the Scottish Government and the Northern Ireland Assembly appears to strengthen the case for Government taking a lead.

Consultants have been examining the case for a small intermodal railhead at Girvan's Grangestone Industrial Estate, initially serving a baseload business of grain by rail from Yorkshire for the Grant's distillery. The project has been lead by the local economic development agency, Ailsa Horizons, which hopes to raise sufficient funding in the forthcoming months to take the project forward to implementation, supported by a Freight Facilities Grant application to the Scottish Government.

In 2006 the Scottish Government awarded £5m Freight Facilities Grant towards the £7m cost of a timber railhead south of Barrhill, fed by private forest roads from a wide surrounding forest catchment. Due to unsuccessful negotiations between Network Rail and Forest Enterprise, the project was shelved, but proposals for a revised scheme are expected to go out to tender from Forest Enterprise in the near future.

The North East Scotland Rail Freight Development Group was instrumental in securing £4m Scottish Government funding for infrastructure upgrading for the movement of tall containers between Central Scotland, Aberdeen and Elgin. This highlights the merits of creating a dedicated and bespoke rail freight partnership for the Stranraer line which can focus specifically on the key issues in the logistics market, as opposed to a wider partnership trying to address both freight and passenger markets.

## Conclusions and recommendations

### Key conclusions:

- 1) The Ayr-Stranraer line has been neglected in the past, 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.
- 2) The case for the regeneration of the railway is supported by the rail development policies and strategic transport objectives of the Scottish Government and by the regional transport strategies of SPT and SWestrans.
- 3) Given that passenger and freight trains (when well loaded) are much more energy-efficient than competing modes of overland transport, future market and policy responses to climate change and oil depletion are likely to contribute to a potentially bigger and more strategic role for the railway in a future low-carbon economy.
- 4) There is no single panacea for the regeneration of the railway, instead there is a wide range of possible national, regional, route corridor and location-specific measures which could help secure increased patronage and net revenue, and improved economic, social and environmental value.
- 5) The line has a range of genuine freight prospects, and both Network Rail and the public sector have a key role to play in realising these, for example through strategic route investment and/or the Scottish Government's Freight Facilities Grant scheme.

### Key recommendations:

- 1) Transport Scotland, ScotRail and Network Rail should assess the operational, resourcing and market implications of a number of possible timetable changes geared to regenerating the Stranraer line, including:
  - at least three fast through trains each way daily between Stranraer and Glasgow via Paisley, with Monday-Friday departures from Glasgow at 07.XX, 09.XX and 16.XX, and from Stranraer at 06.40, 09.40 and 16.40
  - the scope for different Monday-Thursday / Friday, Saturday and Sunday timetables (as opposed to the current Monday-Saturday and Sunday split), reflecting different market patterns and the availability of extra rolling stock at weekends
  - a departure pattern of standard minutes past the hour at Stranraer, with trains running at intervals to specifically suit the key markets available
  - a summer Saturdays through service from Edinburgh to Ayr, Girvan and Stranraer

- summer Sunday service enhancement, with one extra round trip between Glasgow, Girvan and Stranraer
  - filling in some of the major gaps in the timetable at Girvan, with a long-term aspiration to secure an hourly regular-interval service.
- 2) Research should be undertaken by ScotRail, SWestrans and SPT into the opportunities for integrated train-bus services providing access to key visitor attractions – including scheduled bus services on Mondays-Saturdays, and bespoke bus services on Sundays or to destinations which currently have no scheduled services, such as the Mull of Galloway Visitor Centre.
- 3) Passenger Focus and Transform Scotland – as independent ‘honest brokers’ – should facilitate the establishment of a cross-sector and cross-boundary rail regeneration partnership, incorporating a wide range of potential funders, facilitators and delivery agents for specific improvement measures.
- 4) Amongst a number of freight prospects for the line, the concept of a strategic rail ‘landbridge’ has potentially the greatest public funding implications. It is recommended that Transport Scotland should take the lead in bringing interested parties together to discuss possible ways forward, including the development of a bespoke freight partnership for the line.



Transform Scotland  
5 Rose Street  
Edinburgh  
EH2 2PR  
t: +44 (0)131 243 2690  
e: [info@transformscotland.org.uk](mailto:info@transformscotland.org.uk)  
w: [www.transformscotland.org.uk](http://www.transformscotland.org.uk)