



# Why Scottish businesses should try the train not the plane

**PAUL PRENTICE** considers how rail can have the edge over taking the plane

SCOTTISH businesses are being encouraged to switch from air to rail. Current figures suggest that just 12% of business passengers take the trip between Edinburgh or Glasgow and London via the East or West Coast Main Lines. And despite the growth of rail travel between Edinburgh and London by at least 5% year on year between 2007 and 2010 (and an increase of 11% from 2010 to 2011) the small number of business travellers going cross-border by rail remains almost implausibly low.

A new report from Transport Scotland, *On track for business*, picks up from a report commissioned by Virgin Trains in 2007 that sought to ask whether rail was competitive with air for key aspects of business travel. It put forward solutions on how to communicate rail's advantages over air, and whether any service improvements could make rail more competitive.

VT's *Railways Mean Business* was not an in-depth piece of primary research - rather it drew together various pools of information on the subject to present a brochure for the benefits of rail travel as opposed to air. Sustainable transport charity and campaigning organisation Transport Scotland was tasked with writing the report, and in 2012 it has gone about reviewing and improving upon the original report, this time with new research having been undertaken.

The original report's recommendations presented business travel by rail as being an experience akin to that of a mobile office - travelling by train could simply be a part of the working day. Wireless internet (WiFi) had just been introduced on the East Coast Main Line - a new innovation for the railway. For the first time, it was possible to work on the move almost as efficiently as in an office - although WiFi speeds and phone reception still remain inferior on trains regardless of location.

In keeping with the dynamic and youthful VT brand, the report also suggested premium 'perks' such as a free massage (!) on board that could be used to entice business

travellers from planes - which could set rail travel apart from the stresses of airport security, hanging around in terminal buildings and awkward connections from airports to city centres.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the usually traditional nature of the railway industry, some of those more revolutionary suggestions weren't taken up by Virgin or GNER (or successors National Express and East Coast).

Five years on, what has changed? East Coast developed and improved upon its First Class offer in 2011, which highlighted the premium aspects of the service to bring it more in line with that of Virgin Trains. Although First Class is not wholly aimed at business travellers, it was arguable that EC recognised that they were a large part of its premium market and therefore sacrificed such luxuries as a dining car for standard class passengers in favour of those who chose to pay more for their ticket.

And despite the debate over the variances of on-train catering by contributors to *Open Access in RAIL*, chef prepared food catering in a restaurant-like environment is still unmatched by any other overland domestic transport mode, and remains a unique selling point for the railway.

The report also notes the misguided perception among business travellers that rail is somehow less punctual than air, with rail retaining an advantage in terms of higher punctuality and reliability and on-time arrival.

It may not be a particular source of comfort for an industry that has to meet strict public performance measures, but on East Coast cross-border services, punctuality averages 84% or better; more than 20% better than equivalent air services which frequently hit security-related delays. As the report notes, a Deloitte business traveller survey carried out in 2012 found that 67% of respondents found long queues at airports to be a key grievance.

No such frustrations are to be found on the railway - with total journey times of between 3 hours 27 minutes (Edinburgh to London

via Heathrow Airport) and 3 hours 57 minutes (Edinburgh to London via Gatwick) it compares favourably with the flagship East Coast Flying Scotsman service which leaves Edinburgh at 0540 and takes exactly four hours to reach London. Delays aren't unheard of when travelling on the East Coast Main Line of course, but it is statistically less likely that the train will be delayed. Travelling by air can also result in 60 minutes lost working time compared with the

equivalent rail journey; queuing in terminal buildings is exacerbated by the need to transfer from airport to city centre location, or hire car centre, or wherever the business meeting happens to be.

Whether increased productivity is possible at such an unearthly hour of the day that the Flying Scotsman runs is open to question, but when compared with air travel rail can offer an undoubtedly enhanced and less stressful working environment.

The arguments for switching

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Transport consultant David Spaven

business travellers from air to rail is also politically and economically advantageous - Scotland wants to make the case for doing business between two capital cities if Scotland does become independent. The Scottish Government remains committed to high speed rail, despite the current prospect of the 'Y' arms of the network as currently planned not extending north of the Border before 2032 at the earliest.

There is also the environmental case - overlooked frequently in the current political climate - that rail has "long and widely understood to result in significantly lower negative environmental impacts than air travel". The Campaign for Better Transport points out that although aviation is "not yet

a global problem" the UK has a particular problem in that aviation accounts for a whopping 13% of the country's climate impact. Fortunately, the East Coast Main Line "delivers a substantially more sustainable travel option" than by air between Edinburgh and London, with electric trains providing the majority of services although diesel HSTs do run 'under the wires' mainly to make best use of rolling stock and access destinations further north of Edinburgh such as Aberdeen and Inverness.

The challenge has now been laid down again to Scottish business, but as the latest report notes, the 'silver bullet' is harder to achieve, although much has been done to

differentiate the benefits of rail in terms of lower cost. Transport consultant and report author David Spaven, said: "The train beats flying for business travel to London. It offers a high quality working environment, superior environmental performance and, crucially, better value for money. Unless a company's sole criterion for choice of transport is journey time, air shouldn't be treated as an automatic preference over rail.

"As well as the direct business benefits, the substantially lower emissions associated with rail travel mean that businesses can improve their sustainability performance," added Spaven.

But while there may be a challenge for Scottish businesses to adapt, it remains for the principal Scotland-London rail operators to innovate and adapt their services to meet business passengers' needs (and maybe indulge in premium 'luxury' elements that they don't yet know they want).

It may sound a little frivolous, but it's the little things that can really make a journey. Foot spa in First Class, anyone? **✎**

**An East Coast HST passes Dalnacardoch, between Blair Atholl and Newtonmore, on September 22 with the 0755 Inverness-King's Cross. DAVID LINDSAY.**

