

Notes of meeting of Cross Party Group on Rail in the Scottish Parliament of 15 September 2015

Minister for Transport and the Islands Derek Mackay MSP spoke about railway developments. He spoke of good news for Scotland from the benefits of rail investment. He said he was excited by EGIP, the Edinburgh-Glasgow Improvement Project, which would bring improved journey times with electrification. Work on clearing the Winchburgh Tunnel for electric trains had been completed successfully.

The Minister highlighted benefits for Scotland from rail policies including a cap on fares and the development of smart ticketing. The Commonwealth Games of 2014 provided a particular example of the success of the transport network in moving people to and from big events.

Mr Mackay pointed to the Borders Railway as a particular success story. Although there would always be teething troubles with any development, the project was successful. He wished that supporters of rail would be more positive about benefits. He indicated his impatience with negative views.

He said that the ScotRail franchise should lead to further improvements.

Finance would always be limited but transport was a success and rail was a success within that.

In response to questions, the Minister said that what had been committed to would be done. There was more that the SG wanted to do including on the Highland Main Line. Mr Mackay acknowledged that dualling the A9 road was expensive but he believed it to be necessary. Mr Mackay added that he supported modal shift for freight from road to rail. He wanted to see electrification where it would make a big difference. Politicians and communities working together would lead to rail improvements. He aimed to refresh transport policies with local councils.

In response to concerns about the future of railway policing within Police Scotland, Mr Mackay said that he wanted rail expertise to be retained within the police force.

The Minister responded to issues raised concerning hopes for future rail re-openings and openings in Fife, Glasgow and Edinburgh to follow the success of the Borders Railway. He stressed that popular support added weight to the case for rail.

Allison Cosgrove of Railfuture told the Minister that Scotland was the envy of the rest of the UK when it came to railway developments. She welcomed the opening of the Borders Railway. Phil Verster, Managing Director of the ScotRail Alliance, responded to her concerns about the timing of the switch from Club 55 to the new Club 50. He praised Club 50 for delivering benefits. John Mason MSP, co-convenor of the CPG, said he had an interest as a member of ScotRail's Club 50.

Questioners from organisations represented around the table included Stephen Young, Richard Arden, Michael Hogg, Ian Macdonald, Don Blackwood, Roddy Macdougall and Lawrence Marshall.

John Mason MSP invited approval of minutes of CPG meetings from earlier in the year. Approval of minutes of 10 March was moved by Phil McGarry and Roddy Macdougall, and of 28 April by Stephen Young and Allison Cosgrove.

Mr Mason said that the date of the next meeting had to be confirmed but would probably be on a Tuesday in November.

Phil McGarry of the RMT union said he wanted it to be noted that while the expansion of the network was welcome, however any further plans for the future should not include the issues of Driver Only Operation, Closure of Booking Offices and Station De-Staffing. We would urge that the Officials of Transport Scotland should continue to engage with the Trade Unions to establish their positions as and when necessary. Mr McGarry welcomed an assurance from co-convenor John Mason MSP that this would be recorded.