

PE2120/E: Permanently remove peak fare pricing from ScotRail services

Unite the Union written submission, 16 January 2025

Introduction

Unite has previously made clear its backing for the permanent removal of peak fares prices from Scotrail services. We agree with the STUC that the trial, abolishing peak fare prices, was a positive step, however we believe the trial was not long enough to incur a sustained shift in behaviours.

We also believe that the benefits of permanent removal could have long-term positive financial, environmental and social consequences for the Scottish economy which cannot be measured sufficiently in the short period over which the pilot was run. Furthermore, supporting this petition aligns with Unite's commitments to campaign for publicly owned, accessible and affordable transport and we believe it also aligns with the Scottish Government's commitments on reducing Scotland's carbon output.

Unite acknowledges that Scotland's railways represent a vital part of its national infrastructure and that offering an efficient, accessible and affordable railway system for the Scottish people is vital if Scotland is to grow its economy, tackle inequality and meet its climate targets.

In the absence of a Scottish Government published vision for Scotland's railways, Unite alongside the other rail unions presented the report 'A Vision for Scotland's Railways' prior to ScotRail returning to public ownership. A copy of this report was submitted alongside [the submission from our sister union ASLEF](#).

A fundamental argument set out in that report was that if Scotland is to deliver a world class service that tackles inequality and meets its climate targets, then Scotland must make rail travel more affordable.

Investing in rail services and infrastructure (including on reducing fares) will not only help increase passenger numbers it would also help grow the economy. Evidence from a Railway Industry Association report published in 2021, showed how for every £1 spent on rail travel £2.50 is generated for the wider economy. Trains move goods, transport people for work and leisure, and boost economic activity across Scotland, creating and sustaining jobs as a result.

Why peak fares should be scrapped

Unite, along with ASLEF and other unions were delighted when the Government accepted the recommendation to scrap peak fares and were therefore extremely disappointed when the Government made the decision to reverse this. Unite believes that this was a mistake and that far from encouraging users to take more journeys by train this will in fact have the opposite effect.

Rail fares in the UK are some of the highest in Europe and it is a mode of transport that should be expanded in order to help Scotland's goals of net zero.

Unite is firm on the assumption that peak fares are effectively a tax on workers, and we believe that charging workers extra who have to travel on trains classified as peak fares is unfair and unjust. Instead of limiting economic choices, Scotland as a forward looking country, should be opening up the economy and expanding job opportunities by making train travel between conurbations affordable to encourage the movement of people and improving their prospects.

Scrapping peak fares for that short time was significantly beneficial for workers travelling by train. Our sister union ASLEF conducted research into the impact of restoring peak fares on workers in the Transport Minister's own constituency. The research found that a worker who travelled at peak times on a return from Edinburgh from Linlithgow five days a week over the course of a 4 week period will now pay an additional £62 per month and an extra £166 per month if travelling from Linlithgow to Glasgow. These levels of increased fares are being replicated across the country.

Restoring peak fares has had a detrimental impact on the finances of workers who have no option but to travel by train at peak times. We are also concerned that the decision to restore peak fares may also be impacting local high street economies, with the cost of trains significantly reducing the disposable income of rail travellers that can be spent locally and in the town centres where they work.

Unite is astounded that the Scottish Government did not conduct either an economic impact analysis for the personal finances of rail travellers or how the pilot, and then the restoration of peak fares, may impact local economies and communities. Passengers are certainly an important element of the equation, however communities on train routes are also likely to be impacted.

We are pleased that rail travel is seeing passenger numbers increasing towards pre-pandemic levels. One of the factors that has recently seen ticket sales also increasing is because the numbers of revenue collectors has increased exponentially to ensure that revenue is fully optimised.

There is also a fundamental environmental imperative to shift people from road to rail travel. The Scottish Government recognises that transport is the biggest emitter of CO2 emissions and that road travel is the biggest polluter within different modes of transport. If Scotland is to meet its own climate targets, indeed if it is even remotely serious about successfully meeting those targets, then it must make rail travel more affordable and accessible for people in Scotland to help shift people from road to rail.

The Scottish Government's own national transport strategy has committed to reducing car kilometres by 20% by 2030. Set against this policy context it is imperative to shift mindsets and behaviours when it comes to modes of travel. This must mean making rail fares cheaper and more affordable overall and it must mean scrapping peak fares permanently.

Why was the Scottish Government wrong to restore peak fares?

For all the reasons set out above the Scottish Government was short sighted and fundamentally wrong to restore peak fares, and has failed to consider the long term economic, environmental and social benefits of making train travel affordable at all times.

The number of people using the trains was increasing during the pilot. However, consistent growth in rail travel did need a longer time period for the pilot, arguably it needs a definitive decision by the government to scrap peak fares and invest in affordable fares for rail travel so that car travellers have the confidence to switch from car to train. We believe that the Scottish Government did not give the policy enough of a chance to succeed and was too quick and hasty in stopping the pilot and restoring peak fares. It was a short-sighted decision that flew in the face of achieving many of their own policies.

Restoring peak fares has had a significant impact on people who use the trains at peak times, predominantly workers. It is of great concern to us that the government disregarded this impact and took no account of the individual savings made by rail travellers and how this additional income benefited them and their wider local economies. It is staggering that no economic analysis of individual savings/more disposable income for travellers and the impact/benefit for local economies was undertaken by the government.

We urge the Scottish Government to rectify their mistake and invest in scrapping peak fares and reducing fares overall and make them affordable and accessible.