

Scottish Parliament Social Justice & Social Security Committee

Inquiry into Addressing Child Poverty through Parental Employment

Submission by from the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers (RMT) – September 2023

The National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers (RMT) is Britain's largest specialist transport union. The RMT has more than 80,000 members from almost every sector of the transport industry. RMT is by some distance the largest rail union and represents all grades of rail workers. In Scotland, our members in public transport predominantly work in the rail and ferry sectors.

Links between public transport, employment and poverty

RMT believes that a comprehensive, accessible and affordable public transport network is vital for providing access to various services including employment, education and healthcare. Public transport therefore in turn has an important role to play in tackling poverty and inequality and should be a focus for policymakers in this regard.

As the Committee's call for evidence found, a key theme that emerged from responses was the need for a reliable, affordable and more extensive public transport system, and that current prices and service levels can be a barrier to taking up employment (<https://www.parliament.scot/~-/media/committ/6437>).

A 2021 report by the poverty alliance, commissioned by Transport Scotland, found that for people on low incomes 'transport was a vital part of life' and public transport use was influenced by three factors: affordability, accessibility and individual household circumstances (<https://www.povertyalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Transport-and-Child-Poverty-Beyond-the-Pandemic.pdf>).

Research commissioned by the UK Government found that 'transport is an important facilitator of social inclusion and wellbeing, which can affect economic and social outcomes, and therefore inequality' and that the impacts of transport poverty were worse for poorer people in rural areas as 'services are further away, incomes are often lower, and transport costs higher' (https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/953951/Transport_and_inequality_report_document.pdf). Similarly, research from the University of Edinburgh found that people in rural areas are more vulnerable to transport poverty, as well as energy poverty, and that this can reinforce inequalities (<https://www.sps.ed.ac.uk/news-events/news/rural-communities-most-exposed-risk-energy-and-transport-poverty-new-study-finds>).

Given the important role that transport has in reducing inequalities, and the Scottish Government's stated commitment to tackling poverty and inequality, RMT believes that the Scottish Government should prioritise delivering a range of enhancements and improvements to Scotland's rail network. This must include reversing cuts to and expanding ScotRail services, making the rail network safer and more accessible through expanding staffing and protecting ticket offices, keeping Scotland's rail services in public

ownership permanently and investing in Scotland's rail infrastructure.

Not only would significant investment tackle poverty and inequality, it would also support the Scottish Government's other priorities for transport set out in its National Transport Strategy (taking climate action; delivering inclusive economic growth and improving health and wellbeing).

Impact of transport poverty on different groups

The Scottish Government's delivery plan for tackling child poverty identifies six family types at greatest risk of poverty: lone parents, disabled families, larger families, minority ethnic families, families where youngest child is aged less one and families where the mother is aged less than 25. There are clear overlaps with groups who are also more likely to be impacted by unreliable public transport provision.

In addition to being more vulnerable to poverty, women are also nearly twice as likely than men to be in severely insecure work (<https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/work-foundation/publications/the-gender-gap-insecure-work-in-the-uk>). As the Committee's call for evidence found, there are particular challenges experienced by women on public transport, with one response, from Close the Gap, stating that 'women on low incomes are particularly likely to rely on public transport to travel around and commute to work' and that 'safety when travelling to and from work is a further concern for women working in sectors such as retail, care and hospitality, who may finish work late at night'.

Sexual harassment on public transport is a widespread problem, and one that disproportionately affects women and girls. An RMT survey of women public transport members in November 2021 found that 45% had prevented passengers being sexually harassed in the last five years and nearly three-quarters thought that sexual harassment on public transport is becoming a bigger problem (<https://www.rmt.org.uk/news/international-day-for-the-elimination-of-violence-against-women/>). Research by the Suzy Lamplugh Trust from 2021 investigating violence and aggression on public transport found that a shocking 97% of women respondents experienced some form of unwanted behaviour on public transport in the past 5 years and were also more likely to have experienced sexual assault and rape, as well as most behaviours which could be interpreted as sexual harassment.

It is clear that action is required from the Scottish Government to improve safety of women and girls when travelling by public transport. Research published by Transport Scotland in March 2023 found a 'consensus from women and girls of all ages that being in spaces that were staffed or had a staff presence made women feel safer' and that women were more comfortable if ticket offices were open and staffed (especially later at night). The report went on to recommend that the Scottish Government explore increasing staff presence on public transport.

Currently, two-thirds of ScotRail stations are already unstaffed, and where stations are staffed, it is less likely that they will be staffed in evenings and at weekends. Of significant concern is that the Scottish Government has not ruled out cuts to ScotRail ticket offices which were consulted on in early 2022. If implemented, the cuts would mean a reduction in ticket office hours of around a third and make it less likely that staff would be present at stations.

RMT believes that in order to support passenger safety and security when travelling, it must finally rule out cuts to ScotRail ticket offices once and for all, and urgently act on the recommendations of its own report and expand staffing on the rail network.

Disabled people are also more likely to be in poverty and around twice less likely than non-disabled people to use the railway in Scotland (<https://www.transport.gov.scot/media/50099/disability-and-transport-findings-from-the-scottish-household-survey-july-2021.pdf>). In the Transport Scotland research carried out by the Poverty Alliance (<https://www.povertyalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Transport-and-Child-Poverty-Beyond-the-Pandemic.pdf>), one of the issues found to influence transport use was disability access.

It is clear that the Scottish rail network is not properly accessible for disabled people, and that this is undoubtedly a barrier for accessing employment and other opportunities. RMT believes that the presence of staff is key to making the railway fully accessible, and as well as improving passenger safety, passenger access would be significantly improved if the Scottish Government were to rule out cuts to ticket offices and instead expand staffing across the rail network.

Barriers to public transport usage

The cost of public transport is clearly emerges as a concern and barrier for some people on low incomes. We note that the Scottish Government's child poverty delivery plan makes reference to its Fair Fares review. RMT has concerns about the lack of progress and transparency of this review, which was established in 2021. There doesn't appear to be a clear terms of reference or way for the public and other organisations to contribute to the review. The Scottish Government recently stated that the review will report by the end of 2023, and 'recommend a package of measures which can be considered for implementation from 2024-25 and onwards'. We note that from October the Scottish Government will pilot the removal of peak fares on the ScotRail network. We are, of course, supportive of measures which will make rail travel more affordable and believe this can facilitate an increase in rail patronage and support the Scottish Government's goals for transport, including reducing inequalities and poverty.

Also emerging from research and submissions to the Committee's inquiry was the need for increased service provision and more reliable services, and RMT believes that the Scottish Government must therefore also prioritise significantly increasing ScotRail services. We opposed ScotRail's decision to reduce services by over 10% compared to pre-pandemic levels from May 2022. Given that the Scottish Government has been running ScotRail in public ownership since April 2022, it now has direct control over service levels, and it is of significant concern that it has not yet reversed the cuts to services. Data from the ORR reveals that in the year to March 2023, ScotRail operated just 79% of the passenger train kilometres it did for the year to March 2020. These service cuts have translated to significantly reduced passenger numbers, with passenger numbers at 66% of pre-pandemic levels during the same period (<https://dataportal.orr.gov.uk/media/2207/passenger-rail-usage-jan-mar-2023.pdf>). The ORR notes that operators running close to pre-pandemic levels of trains have seen a stronger return in passenger numbers (<https://dataportal.orr.gov.uk/media/2124/passenger-rail-usage-apr-jun-2022.pdf>).

Reversing the post-pandemic cuts to ScotRail services, followed by a comprehensive expansion of services, with a focus on improving access in rural areas and areas that are currently poorly served by the rail network, should also be a priority for the Scottish Government. We note that the Scottish Government's child poverty delivery plan makes no reference to increasing rail services in relation to its goal of 'Enhancing access and affordability of public transport'.

Whilst increasing staffing and services would inevitably require additional investment from

the Scottish Government, it would deliver significant benefits for society and the economy. Research has shown that every £1 spent on the rail network generates £2.20 of income in the wider economy
(www.riagb.org.uk/RIA/Newsroom/Publications%20Folder/Oxford_Economics.aspx).

There also needs to be a reframing of how investment in public transport is viewed. Public transport is an essential public service that requires significant investment from Government and should not be seen as something to draw profit from or as a cost to be cut. Even where routes may be deemed to be 'unprofitable' – the reality is that they are likely to be socially and/or economically necessary and must be supported.

Public ownership of Scotland's rail passenger services, of course, provides the necessary model for this, and RMT welcomes a commitment given to us by the now First Minister that ScotRail and Caledonian Sleeper will remain permanently in public ownership.

Investing in expanding ScotRail staffing and services would also be a valuable opportunity for the Scottish Government to create new, secure, green jobs and would therefore also contribute to poverty reduction in this way as well.

Summary

We support the Committee's interest in this area, and believe that public transport has an important role to play in reducing inequality and poverty, and that access to employment, especially for people on low incomes, is intrinsically linked to access to reliable, affordable and accessible public transport.

We have set out what we believe should be priorities for the Scottish Government in terms of the rail network namely: protecting ticket offices; expanding rail staffing; reversing cuts to and expanding rail services and retaining rail services in public ownership. If delivered, not only would this support the Scottish Government's goals around poverty reduction, but would also support delivery of other targets, for instance in relation to carbon emissions and reducing car usage in Scotland.