



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee

Tuesday 30 May 2023

Session 6



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NET ZERO, ENERGY AND TRANSPORT COMMITTEE
19th Meeting 2023, Session 6

CONVENER

*Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Fiona Hyslop (Linlithgow) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)

*Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con)

*Monica Lennon (Central Scotland) (Lab)

*Ash Regan (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)

*Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Mick Hogg (National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers)

Alex Hynes (Scotland's Railway)

Gary Kelly (Transport Salaried Staffs Association)

Kevin Lindsay (Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen)

David Lowrie (Scottish Rail Holdings Ltd)

Joanne Maguire (ScotRail Trains Ltd)

Robert Samson (Transport Focus)

Liam Sumpter (Network Rail Scotland)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Peter McGrath

LOCATION

The Mary Fairfax Somerville Room (CR2)

Scottish Parliament

Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee

Tuesday 30 May 2023

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:31]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (Edward Mountain): Good morning and welcome to the 19th meeting of the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee in 2023. The first item on the agenda is to decide whether to take in private item 3, which is consideration of the evidence on the railways that we will hear today. Do we agree to take item 3 in private?

Members indicated agreement.

Transfer of Operation of ScotRail

09:31

The Convener: Our next item of business is an evidence session on Scotland's railways. In March last year, the committee held evidence sessions with rail industry stakeholders and the Scottish Government in advance of ScotRail's transfer into public ownership, and we agreed to keep a watching brief on the issue.

The purpose of today's session is to take stock of ScotRail's first year in public ownership, considering issues such as industrial relations, fares and usage, and the future of the rail industry in Scotland.

I am pleased to welcome on our first panel Mick Hogg, who is the regional organiser and lead officer for ScotRail and Caledonian Sleeper at the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers; Gary Kelly, who is the organiser for Scotland and Ireland at the Transport Salaried Staffs' Association; Kevin Lindsay, who is the district organiser for the Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen; and Robert Samson, who is the senior stakeholder manager for Transport Focus.

I thank you very much for accepting our invitation; we are delighted to have you here. We have allowed about an hour for the session.

We will go straight into questions, and the first ones will come from Fiona Hyslop, who is the deputy convener.

Fiona Hyslop (Linlithgow) (SNP): Good morning and thank you for joining us. I direct my first questions to Robert Samson from Transport Focus. What have your passengers been experiencing over the past year? What are they telling you?

Your study has identified value for money as passengers' number 1 priority but states that only 65 per cent of ScotRail passengers consider their trips value for money. What is your view on that situation? How can it be improved? Are you considering any lessons from other rail services elsewhere in the United Kingdom and across Europe?

There is quite a lot in there, but it is an opening to give your view on where we are now and what you think could be improved, particularly around value for money.

Robert Samson (Transport Focus): Value for money in all our surveys is a top driver of passengers' satisfaction, followed by punctuality and reliability. Passengers have welcomed the continuing ScotRail fares freeze, and we are

looking forward to the trial suspension of peak-time fares later this year, too, to ascertain what value that will have for passengers and whether it grows passenger numbers on ScotRail services. Passengers have welcomed a number of promotions by ScotRail, including the kid for a quid ticket. The off-peak market has grown and is almost back to pre-Covid levels, which is good.

Passengers want an easy-to-understand fares system. Sometimes, it is complex to navigate through the myriad ticket offers that are available. The system should be simple, easy to understand and easy to use. There has been a great take-up of mobile apps in travel, but we produced a report recently about digital exclusion, so it is worth remembering that market and making the system easy to use. Passengers also value a visible staff presence at stations so that they can get advice from ticket office staff on the best ticket for their needs.

Although there are myriad ticket offers, the overall fares system needs to be simplified so that passengers can buy the product that they want. In any other industry, buying a ticket is your front door. We need to make it easy, affordable and value for money. Punctuality and reliability are linked to value for money. In the rail system, millions of fares and tickets are available, so we need to simplify the system and make it easier for passengers to understand.

Fiona Hyslop: Are you are aware of any lessons from elsewhere in the UK or Europe?

Robert Samson: Fares promotions help, but all our work comes down to the simple point of making tickets easy to understand, affordable and easy to purchase. It comes back to having an easy-to-understand fares system across all operators in Great Britain.

Fiona Hyslop: Have you picked up on any lessons over the past year, since ScotRail came under the Scottish Government's direct control?

Robert Samson: There has not been any great change in the fares system in the past 12 months, apart from the fact that the uptake of digital provision in the mobile app has been good. We campaigned for flexible season tickets now that the commuter market has changed and their introduction, offering a discount to passengers, seems to have gone well. It is all about attracting people back to rail and those initiatives seem to have helped in that regard.

Fiona Hyslop: Okay. Mick Hogg, would you like to tell us anything from your experience of what has happened for staff and passengers over the past year?

Mick Hogg (National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers): First and foremost,

value for money and the reliability of the trains are crucial. We also need safe trains. That is very important for not just staff, but passengers.

We need a train system that is free from antisocial behaviour, need to ensure that it is affordable for staff to use the train system, and need to ensure that staff are in stations. That is important, because the most vulnerable people in society are very reluctant to use Scotland's trains if antisocial behaviour is out of control. Therefore, we need booking offices to remain open and stations to be staffed to ensure that Scotland's railway is open for all.

That is very important as far as the RMT is concerned. We also need to ensure that antisocial behaviour is addressed because it is getting worse. It is not getting any better.

Fiona Hyslop: I asked you about what has happened in the past year. You have set out what you think is needed for the future but, before I move on to Gary Kelly, do you want to say anything about what your experience has been over the past year?

Mick Hogg: We have seen an upturn in assaults and antisocial behaviour. Young people are using the trains and stations as dens to continue with antisocial behaviour. We need more legislation to address antisocial behaviour because the British Transport Police tell us that they do not have the powers to do that. That is not to demonise young people. We need a robust system.

I have said this for quite a long time, and I will say it again: if we can ban people who are responsible for antisocial behaviour from football grounds and shopping centres, why can we not ban them from Scotland's railway? It is just bizarre as far as I am concerned.

Fiona Hyslop: None of your staff should have to be subjected to antisocial behaviour. We all have a responsibility to support them in that regard.

Gary Kelly, what changes—good, bad and indifferent—have you seen over the past year?

Gary Kelly (Transport Salaried Staffs Association): There have not been any significant changes in ScotRail Trains Ltd over the past year. That is not unusual because, in the first year after a transfer under the Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) Regulations, most employers do not make any significant or substantial changes to the workforce. There have not been any massive changes in the organisational structures; there has been no restructuring. There have been a few changes at the director level and in the departments across directorates, but the organisational structure of

ScotRail Trains Ltd has, more or less, stayed the same.

A bit earlier than a year ago, in October 2021, we published “A Vision for Scotland’s Railways”. One reason why we did that was that there had been a significant reduction in passenger services of about 300 per day. The number of services has slowly been increasing again, but there are fewer trains available now than there were previously.

As Mick Hogg noted, there are issues on the ground with antisocial behaviour.

Over the past year, there has been an increase in uncertainty among staff, particularly those in booking offices. Abellio commissioned a report by Professor Iain Docherty, which recommended closing booking offices. A schedule 17 review looked at the opening and closing times of booking offices throughout the network, and it recommended that booking offices at three stations should close. We have successfully fought back against that so far, but, as far as we are aware, the issue has not been entirely taken off the table, which creates a great deal of uncertainty for staff in booking offices throughout the network. We have pressed the previous minister and the current minister to take those proposals off the table and, in essence, bin them, but we have not received the comfort and assurance that that will happen.

The major issues for staff are the potential impacts or knock-on effects of new structures being introduced in the holding company above ScotRail Trains Ltd. The imposition of public sector pay policy also has an impact on staff in relation to how trade unions negotiate. There are therefore various issues, but, as an organisation, ScotRail Trains Ltd has not changed too much.

Fiona Hyslop: My final question is for Kevin Lindsay. Have you had different experiences over the past year? The publication of “A Vision for Scotland’s Railways” has been a very important contribution in relation to what Scotland’s railways could be, or should be, in the future. We do not have time to go through all that today, but can you reflect briefly on what has happened over the past year and what you see happening with “A Vision for Scotland’s Railways”? It would be helpful if you could say whether you have had any engagement with the Scottish Government on such issues over the past year.

Kevin Lindsay (Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen): The first change is that there has been an improvement in industrial relations. Under Abellio, there was 1970s them-versus-us conflict and behaviour from the management, which led to all sorts of disputes. Our union has not been on strike in Scotland since 2002. I cannot say that about England and

Wales—it seems that a week does not go by in which we are not in dispute. There have been significant improvements in industrial relations.

You asked Robert Samson what we can learn from elsewhere. Integrated ticketing is a must. When I get the tram at the bottom of Leith Walk to Edinburgh Waverley, the train to Glasgow and then the underground, I deal with three separate companies. Surely it cannot be beyond us, as a nation, to produce an integrated ticketing system. We could use a tap-and-go system, or we could buy tickets online or in a booking office. That would be an easy fix for us.

Surprise, surprise, that leads me nicely to my next point, which is about one of the things that we included in “A Vision for Scotland’s Railways”. We see that as a talking document; it is not a panacea, and it does not have all the answers. The idea behind it was to start a debate. What sort of railway do we want in Scotland? Do we want a cheap railway with hardly any trains, or do we want a railway that is there for the people?

A railway has to be accessible, affordable, reliable and safe. At the moment, we are not quite hitting the targets for all that. My big bugbear about the railways is that we run the old InterCity 125 high-speed trains. Glasgow is introducing a low emission zone from 1 June, yet 18 heavily polluting trains a day will be coming into Glasgow Queen Street station. Those trains will be more polluting than any 1995 bus, lorry or car, yet we are running those trains into the city. There has to be joined-up policy—that goes for green policies, too.

09:45

Genuinely, I could go on for hours about a vision for Scotland’s railways, whether that relates to developing apprenticeships or bringing in more reliable trains. I always go on about ticketing, which is a key part of it. I am delighted that the Scottish Government listened to us when we campaigned hard to scrap peak-time fares. I always saw that as a tax on workers and I never understood why we had them. Peak fares were used to reduce the number of people who were taking trains in the mornings. Surely, we now want people on trains so that they can come back into our city centres and towns and start spending money there, which will grow our economy.

The Convener: We will come to the subject of ticketing later. You are obviously passionate about it, so you will get a chance to come in on it.

Fiona Hyslop: I am happy to move on, convener.

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): My question is for Robert Samson. Transport

Focus is arguing for the creation of a ScotRail challenge group. I know that there is a ScotRail stakeholder panel just now. Can you explain the difference between the two? What would you like out of a challenge group?

Robert Samson: ScotRail's stakeholder panel is advisory. It gets an agenda from ScotRail and comments on its plans. Monopolies in other industries have panels that are more focused on user challenge—they look at the business plans and challenge management about them. We feel that that would be a step forward now that ScotRail is in public ownership. It would allow passenger and other groups to have more of an insight and to be able to challenge ScotRail in order to make sure that its direction as a business is channelled towards what passengers and potential passengers want.

Other industries, such as utilities, have had challenge panels and those seem to have been a success, with good business engagement. All our insight reflects getting the consumer voice embedded in the decision-making processes and the start of this new journey with ScotRail is an opportunity to do that. We would be able to have better consultation on timetables, the fare structures and the direction of the business. We think that a better voice for consumers is important at this time in Scotland.

Jackie Dunbar: You think that you would be heard more, rather than—

Robert Samson: Yes, we would be heard more than an advisory voice would. Being embedded in the business is not about making the final decisions, but ensuring that before final decisions are made, the consumer voice is not only heard, but listened to and, where appropriate, acted on in order to get a better service for customers.

Jackie Dunbar: I have another question, convener. Would you like me to ask it later?

The Convener: Yes. That would fit logically.

Monica Lennon (Central Scotland) (Lab): I refer to my entry in the register of members' interests as a member of the RMT parliamentary group as well as Unite the Union. I mention that, because "A Vision for Scotland's Railways", which has been referred to, was co-authored by Unite, and I might have a question about that.

Does the panel have a view on how the new institutional arrangements for the provision of ScotRail's services are working? Are the roles and lines of communication between Scottish ministers, Transport Scotland, Scottish Rail Holdings and ScotRail sufficiently clear and well understood to ensure that the focus remains on current and future service delivery? If not, how

could things be improved? I will start with Mick Hogg.

Mick Hogg: If I am honest, I am certainly not clear about the setup. It is quite confusing; we have Scottish Rail Holdings, Transport Scotland, the ScotRail board and the transport secretary. It is really confusing for the unions to follow what is to be put in place for Scotland's railway. We are keen to have good and positive working relationships with all parties but, to be brutally honest, I find the model hard to follow.

Monica Lennon: How could it be improved? We are keen to see whether lessons can be learned for other organisations that might want to follow the model, so how could it be simplified?

Mick Hogg: We need less bureaucracy, if I am being honest, and more focus on Scotland's railway. We should be spending our time and energy on running Scotland's railway.

As Kevin Lindsay has said, industrial relations used to be an issue. We have now got rid of the bullies and have good working relationships with the chief executive officer and other senior managers within Scotland's Railway. Pay is another good example. For the majority of unions, pay is on a good track compared to where it was last year, with the debacle that we had to go through. We are on a better footing now.

Gary Kelly: I will explain the model as best I can. We have ScotRail Trains Ltd, then the parent company Scottish Rail Holdings; there is also a Transport Scotland sponsor, who, as far as I understand it, reports to the strategic rail board, which is part of Transport Scotland; and there is also the minister. So, there are four or five layers that go up, down and across. The ScotRail/Network Rail alliance board sits somewhere in all that, too, although I am not sure at which level.

It is my understanding that the roles and responsibilities are not entirely clear. I think that there is some information out there that says that ScotRail Trains Ltd is meant to lead on the strategic direction of the business, in line with Scottish Government objectives, and that the holding company is there to oversee that. The Transport Scotland sponsor, via the strategic rail board, is there to ensure that sponsors act appropriately, and the minister reports to that board.

If that sounds overly complicated, that is probably because it is. There are quite a few cogs there and I do not believe that they are working harmoniously at the moment, because of the lack of clarity about roles and responsibilities. However, we have had only a year of this structure, and things like that take some time to bed in. Moreover, it is not too different from what

existed under Abellio and FirstGroup, with a subsidiary reporting to a parent company in Holland and Scottish Government involvement. The layers that we have now are probably broadly reflective of what was previously there.

It is 20 or 30 years since the railway in Scotland has been in public hands. We should give the new methodology and new system of working a wee bit of time to bed in, but it does seem to be overcomplicated. I would like to know whether the roles and responsibilities are clear to the people involved and whether there are too many cogs in the machine, but I do not know whether now is the right time to make that judgment.

The Convener: You have made an interesting point, and I would like to hear what Kevin Lindsay and Robert Sansom think about it. I spent the weekend struggling to understand who reports to whom and at which level, but after spending three days on it, I am still no clearer. I am supposed to be in the know about what is going on, but that was opaque and confusing to me. Thank you for trying to explain it. I am not sure that I am any clearer, but that is no criticism of you—it is a criticism of the system.

Kevin Lindsay: I do not think that I am going to make things any clearer for you, convener. The cabinet secretary sits at the top; you then have a transport minister, then Transport Scotland and then SRH. That bit is all quite clear, but the whole point of setting up SRH was that it should be arm's length. The cabinet secretary is definitely at arm's length, wants nothing to do with railways and does not want to touch this. The transport minister is still getting to know his brief. Since the inception of the Scottish Parliament—or its reopening, depending on your point of view—I have dealt with 14 transport ministers from three political parties, all of whom have had their own ways of dealing with stuff. I look forward to working with Kevin Stewart to see how he will approach this.

SRH's board has went through several changes already. We have seen the chief executive resign—or be pushed—because of what might or might not have been political interference. That needs clarity.

Underneath SRH sits ScotRail's board, and a new board for Caledonian Sleeper is coming in, too. To one side is a board for ScotRail Alliance; it includes the managing director of Scotland's Railway, Alex Hynes, who will describe his role to the committee today and who kindly sent me a diagram to explain where he sat in the Scotland's Railway structure.

Convener, I agree with you: I am still no clearer about the role of the managing director of Scotland's Railway. It also has a chief operating officer; Caledonian Sleeper has a managing

director; and SRH has a chief executive and a chair. There seems to be an awful lot of people—I nearly said that they have their noses in the trough, but that would be a bit unfair—who are getting paid six-figure salaries for being in senior positions, some of which are for one, two or three days per week.

There needs to be clarity. If we are gonnae be true to what we want, the Government should set the policy, and SRH and the ScotRail board should get on wi it. I do not see why Caledonian Sleeper is an add-on; it should be put back into ScotRail. By doing that, you would make an instant saving.

Gary Kelly is right. It is early days, and there is confusion, but we could streamline the system a lot further.

Monica Lennon: You have all done well to talk us through that.

I have a question for Kevin Lindsay before I move to Robert Samson. If the system is overly complex at the moment, and if it can be streamlined to get more clarity, what more can be done to improve lines of accountability and to clarify where responsibility lies? Are things transparent enough? I am keen to hear about what the system looks like from a public perspective.

Kevin Lindsay: Transparency is a huge issue. For example, although the minutes of the meetings of the various boards are published, they can be heavily redacted.

People need to set out what we want from the railways. Political parties should put their approaches in their manifestos, and when a particular party wins an election, its position should become its policy. The ministers in the Cabinet should set that by giving SRH a deal, saying, "Here is what you have to deliver", and then let it get on with it.

I appreciate that MSPs will raise issues from their constituencies. That is acceptable, but the fact is that the professionals on the railways are the railway people. If we are employing people on six-figure salaries, we must let them do the job—and I would suggest that we have a board that gets on with that. ScotRail should report in, as should Caledonian Sleeper initially. I hope that we can move Scotland's railways back into one company, because there is no need for two separate companies with separate boards.

We are delighted that the Scottish Government has taken steps to bring the railways back into public ownership. However, Abellio still runs the payroll for ScotRail, and we are still paying private operating companies for rolling stock. The position with the sleeper is even more complicated. The only aspects that have been nationalised are the

train managers, the sleeper hosts and the name—everything else is in private hands. We need to consider all those functions and ask how much they are costing taxpayers and what we want to do with them in future.

I am going off at a tangent, but the issues are all interconnected. We need an overall strategy and we must be clear about what we are looking at.

Monica Lennon: That was all very helpful—thank you. I turn to Robert Samson.

Robert Samson: I will not repeat everything that has been said, but I agree that the structure is complicated.

I would like to think that we have good working relationships with all the bodies. We also sit down with passengers in focus groups on rail and bus travel—there are various issues with bus travel, because of franchising and public and private partnerships—and we go through the structures of the rail and bus industries with them. About halfway through, though, they just shake their heads and say, “Whatever the structure might be, we as consumers just want it to work so that it is easy to use, punctual and reliable.”

We hope that the recently published high-level output specification by Scottish ministers and Transport Scotland will bring some improvement. Network Rail now has to establish, and operate with ScotRail Trains Ltd, a joint Scotland-based timetabling team to deliver all activity in the Scottish rail network, which we hope will bring about a more joined-up approach. At the end of the day, passengers buy a ticket for a timetable that is deliverable, punctual and reliable.

10:00

The high-level output specification also sets out passenger satisfaction targets that ScotRail and Caledonian Sleeper have to meet. To a certain degree, and regardless of the structure, we are content that there will be better timetable delivery. Hopefully it will be on paper—we will see what the product is—but there are targets to deliver certain levels of passenger satisfaction and punctuality 92.5 per cent of the time, which will be an improvement on what we have today. We are looking at those outputs, because that is what passengers, as consumers, are focused on, rather than the structures.

Monica Lennon: Thank you.

The Convener: Thank you, Monica, and thank you all for your valiant efforts to explain all that. The next questions are from Mark Ruskell.

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): The impression that I am getting this morning is that industrial relations have improved

a bit over the past year. Indeed, Mick Hogg has said that you have got rid of the bullies. Has it made a difference having a union representative on Scottish Rail Holdings?

Mick Hogg: Yes. The four rail unions agreed that we would collectively support Roz Foyer from the Scottish Trades Union Conference. Roz obviously does a job for the four rail unions and it is right that she should be there.

There is an issue arising with the Caledonian sleeper from 25 June. The question is: should Roz Foyer represent ScotRail and the sleeper or should there be a separate union representative for Scottish Rail Holdings and the sleeper? They are two different organisations. As Kevin Lindsay rightly said, there should be one organisation for Scotland’s railway.

Industrial relations have improved dramatically. We welcome good industrial relations, because if they are good, there is no way to have disputes. I have to put my cards on the table—RMT has never hesitated to issue ballot papers if there is an issue that we feel strongly about, and we will continue to issue ballot papers if we feel strongly that someone is facing a disciplinary through a miscarriage of justice and we need to take action to defend our member or our membership. However, industrial relations are certainly good and we welcome that.

Mark Ruskell: Gary Kelly and Kevin Lindsay, has that model of union representation worked?

Gary Kelly: Industrial relations have improved since the move to public ownership, but there are still issues, chief among which is the public sector pay policy. That is probably the one thing that has led to more disruption than anything else since the move to public ownership.

Kevin Lindsay mentioned transparency. The situation has also improved somewhat, but there are still issues with transparency and openness from ScotRail Trains Ltd. I would say that this is work in progress; it is not really where I would like to see things, but I have noticed a move in the right direction.

The issue of the public sector pay policy needs to be resolved. I would say that, relatively speaking, there has not been massive contention over the past two years. There have been disputes, but if the Government of the day were to be slightly different or were to take a different approach to pay, there could be a massive flashpoint further down the line. The issue needs to be looked at, because our view is that we should not be restricted in our collective bargaining. We should be able to negotiate freely and openly with an employer, whether it be ScotRail Trains Ltd or anyone else, or it could cause issues in future.

Kevin Lindsay: As I said earlier, industrial relations have improved significantly. I was just looking at my notes and saw one that said that IR has improved but ScotRail is now on its third human resources director since nationalisation. This might be a bit flippant, but perhaps ScotRail not having an HR director has helped us.

Some praise has to be given to the ScotRail board for taking the company in a different direction. Its members want to engage with us and they have tried to put out the fires before they got started. That has got to be welcome.

On public sector pay policy, we said from the outset, during all the TUPE meetings and so on, that if the Scottish Government went down the line of trying to impose public sector pay policy on the rail trade unions, it would find itself in dispute. I didn't need a crystal ball to see that. We have always been willing to negotiate, and we have been modernising since Stephenson's rocket. We are always willing to sit down, do deals and move things forward, but if we are suddenly told, "That's what you're getting—and there's no negotiation", that cannot work. We will not accept it and it will lead to conflict.

We do not want to stop trains—we want to run them. We want to get as many passengers as possible on them. I am delighted that, just now, ScotRail's performance is daein great; its passenger numbers are more than 200,000 a day. I am sure that the chief operating officer and those coming in behind us will explain how high the revenue is just now—I can tell you that it is running at 10 or 12 per cent above target. That all has to be welcome, but it is all based on good industrial relations.

We need to build on where we are just now and get some of that stuff on board. The key part of all of this is the passengers, whom we can never forget. They are key, and we need to get more of them back on to the railway. Good IR is key; the structure helps in that respect; and having a trade union voice on the board is helpful, too. Better working relations between ScotRail and the trade union officials have certainly delivered.

Mark Ruskell: That is good to hear.

Jackie Dunbar: I will go to Kevin Lindsay, although I was going to address my question to Mick Hogg and might come back to him as well.

When you spoke about the pay for rail staff, you said that putting rail staff on to the Scottish Government pay policy will not work. Will you explain why that will not work? Why should rail staff have an exemption?

Kevin Lindsay: I believe in free collective bargaining. That is fundamental. If I go to a negotiation, there has to be a negotiation. I must

be able to give and take, and that has to go both ways. If I walk in and it is a fait accompli—I am told, "That's what you're getting, because the minister says so"—there is zero point in me being in there. In such circumstances, if the offer is not high enough, I can just miss out the negotiations and go straight to industrial action.

We sought advice. Alex Rowley MSP wrote to the Scottish Parliament information centre, seeking clarity on where ScotRail sat. SPICe's advice was in direct contradiction to the advice that we got from the Scottish Government. I have shared it with Kevin Stewart and Jenny Gilruth. I have had two different letters back from Jenny and Kevin on their version of what took place, and what they are saying is not very clear other than that they are following Scottish Government policy.

SPICe said to us that Scottish Rail Holdings sits outside of the Government but that the directors of that business must be aware of Scottish Government policy on public sector pay. That is different from the instruction, "You will follow public sector pay policy." The Scottish Government's transport ministers do not accept that. I therefore think that there needs to be some clarity in this building, on who is right and who is wrong.

For the past two years, the public sector pay policy has been forced on us, then negotiations have taken place in which we have come up with a form of words that takes us away from that to do a deal. In my opinion, supposedly sticking to that pay policy yet doing deals does not sit with the Scottish Government's interpretation of the public sector pay policy. However, SPICe's advice would fit perfectly with that situation—that directors must take cognisance of public sector pay policy but can still negotiate.

The Convener: Will you clarify that for me? I am a little confused. In the last year of the franchise, when ScotRail was going to be nationalised, Abellio could make decisions on wages provided that those were approved by the Scottish Government. It could not make a decision without approval from the transport minister, because that was part of the agreement.

Kevin Lindsay: Yes.

The Convener: What you have suggested—I want to understand this—is that, now, any pay rises have to be approved by the Scottish Government, although the decision is made by an arm's-length company. Is that what you are saying?

Kevin Lindsay: Yes, but you have to remember that it must jump through all the hoops. We meet SRT, which reports to SRH, which reports to TS, which reports to the transport minister, who reports to the cabinet secretary. That is how we ended up with the carry-on that we had last year;

we were jumping through every one of those hoops to get there, but we finally did it.

Things have been a lot smoother this year. I do not know whether SRT has been given the authority from the various groups that sit above it, but we have done a deal this year. That is the subject of a referendum and is now with our members. However, the increase is above that set out in the public sector pay policy, which does not tie in with the letter that I have received from the Scottish Government, saying, "You will stick to public sector pay." What I am saying is that it follows, instead, the advice that SPICe gave us through Alex Rowley. I am happy to provide the briefing papers that we got.

The Convener: I think that that would be useful for the committee to understand it. I am sorry, Jackie—I jumped in on your question.

Jackie Dunbar: I am not trying to put words into your mouth—I am just trying to understand the situation. Are you saying that, just now, you think that you should be exempt from the policy because of the confusion and the need for more clarity? I am not suggesting that, if you got that clarity, you would automatically go for it, but is it one of your main reasons for thinking that you should not be part of the same pay policy, or am I misinterpreting you?

Kevin Lindsay: I do not believe that we should be part of public sector policy. ScotRail is an arm's-length company; it is not like the civil servants in this building, who are direct employees of the Scottish Government.

Scottish Water already sits outside the policy, as does Caledonian MacBrayne, so why is ScotRail being brought into it? It does not make sense to me. It should never have gone in that direction; the Government was repeatedly warned from the start that trying to impose the public sector pay policy would just end in conflict.

I am not saying that we will get better deals from it, but I strongly believe in free collective bargaining. That is the procedure agreement that we sign with every rail company. It signs it; we sign it; and we move forward. You do not always have to agree, but you have to set the rules for how you play. You cannot have someone who has never signed any agreement, saying, "By the way, these are the new rules", because that is never going to sit well with trade unionists.

Jackie Dunbar: Thank you. That really does make more sense. Mick Hogg, do you want to add anything?

Mick Hogg: It is a shambles, if I am honest. As Kevin Lindsay has rightly said, we have never agreed with being part of the public sector pay policy. We and all the unions certainly feel that it is

direct interference in free collective bargaining, and we would want to see public sector pay policy removed and the unions allowed to bargain freely.

Again, as Kevin Lindsay has rightly said, Caledonian MacBrayne, the teachers, the firefighters and so on are not covered by the public sector pay policy. The Caledonian MacBrayne example is quite interesting; I think that, last year, its staff got a 7 or 7.2 per cent pay increase—it was there or thereabouts—which is way beyond the 5 per cent under the public sector pay policy.

That said, we have, as Kevin rightly said, done a deal this year, and it is about not just pay but terms and conditions. We have also advocated for and successfully negotiated a better deal for low-paid workers, which is a key policy for my trade union. The deal will, hopefully, be acceptable to our members; it has gone to a referendum ballot, and the result of that will be known very shortly. Certainly, though, the public sector pay policy is a no-go as far as RMT and my other rail union colleagues are concerned.

Jackie Dunbar: Thank you.

The Convener: I call Mark Ruskell.

Mark Ruskell: You have mentioned the future of ticket offices, and the uncertainty over the Government's intention in that respect. What do you see as the future for such offices? Do you see the existing service being maintained forever, or do you see change being introduced? If so, what would that change look like?

Mick Hogg: We are opposed to any talk of closing ticket offices. I have mentioned the antisocial behaviour issue, and we certainly believe that that issue and the issue of ticket offices are inextricably linked. That behaviour, and the assaults on passengers and staff, are on the increase. Indeed, the most vulnerable people in society are very reluctant to use Scotland's railway, because antisocial behaviour is out of control.

10:15

We have heard on countless occasions that Scotland's railway is open for all. It cannot be open for all if the issue of antisocial behaviour is getting worse—and it is getting worse. I do not want to be the one who says to the transport secretary or the chief executive officer of Scotland's railway, "I told you so—someone has now lost their life as a result of antisocial behaviour."

I do not want to repeat myself on the legislation issue. Like I said, if we can ban people from football grounds and shopping centres, why can we not ban people who are found guilty of antisocial behaviour from the railways? I would go

a step further. I would name and shame those people who have been found guilty of assaults and antisocial behaviour on Scotland's railway.

Mark Ruskell: Robert Sansom, what is the passenger view on ticket offices in the future?

Robert Samson: As I keep repeating, passengers want a visible staff presence. We had 1,500 responses from passengers to the ticket office consultation. Many of those were about the act of buying a ticket, the suitability of ticket vending machines and the need for them to sell the full range of tickets and to be easy to use. Many of the responses were also about the availability of waiting rooms and toilet facilities at stations, if there are no staff. As Mick Hogg mentioned, passengers have concerns about antisocial behaviour and personal security. There were also concerns about accessibility for passengers with additional needs. There was a range of issues that are wrapped up in the issue of stations, but the consultation looked only at the simple act of buying a ticket.

The ticketing settlement governs a regulatory process that governs changes to ticket offices, and it looks only at the simple act of buying a ticket—the retailing. However, when we ask passengers for their views, they comment on a range of staffing issues at stations. From our point of view, it would be far better if the regulation shifted from the ticket office opening hours to station staffing hours. That would give the railways more options to redeploy staff and it would give passengers more protection and allow for more enforcement. The process looks only at retailing in isolation.

Mark Ruskell: Maybe they are misnamed. They are not ticketing offices; they are station offices, really. That might give us a sense of where things could go.

Robert Samson: Yes, because, when we ask passengers for their views, they come back with comments on a whole range of station issues, not just the retailing aspects. Although we can make recommendations—as we have and as I have referenced in our written evidence—they are non-binding. Given that retailing aspect, the only way that we can make a change is that, if an office sells 12 tickets or fewer in an hour, they can change the station opening times. It does not deal with the whole-station aspect—it is just retailing. We think that that is a flaw in the regulatory process, but our hands are tied by that.

Gary Kelly: Robert Sansom has hit on the issue. Yes, the ticketing system is massively complex. Going to the ticket office to buy a ticket is probably the easiest way to get the cheapest ticket available. I do not think that you can get that from TVMs. You certainly would not be able to get complex tickets any cheaper than you can in a

ticket office, because those staff know the best option for you. However, it is crucial to know that the people who work in ticket offices do not only sell tickets. They do a range of other activities, including station maintenance. They ensure that the station is clean, tidy and gritted; they ensure that any defects are reported; and they provide the passenger assist service to get people on and off trains. At some stations, those staff also do train dispatch as well.

These station staff are called station grades. There is a separate staff grade called travel shop, which is dedicated only to selling tickets, which is relevant to the more major stations. However, in suburban stations, it is largely the station-grade staff who do a lot of the work. They do not just sit behind a desk and sell tickets; it is not only a retail role.

The proposal on the table looked at closing three booking offices but altering the opening and closing times for the remainder—if they do not sell 12 tickets an hour. In effect, it proposed that a booking office that might currently be open from 7 am to 7 pm would be shut for a large proportion of the day and staffed only at the busiest period. That takes bodies out of the railway. For all the reasons that Mick Hogg identified about antisocial behaviour and customer service, we do not think that that would be a good idea.

We need to have staff at stations, but it is crucial to note that they do not only sell tickets. They already do the range of activities that passengers want to see happening. It would be a mistake to take the staff out of those stations and to redeploy them at a barrier in Glasgow Central station or somewhere similar.

Mark Ruskell: I am content to move on, unless Kevin Lindsay has something to add.

The Convener: I would like to ask a question. What percentage of tickets are bought online? How many people buy their tickets at the station, relative to the number of people who go on to Trainline—or however else they do it—to buy their tickets? Do you know the answer to that?

Robert Samson: Online purchasing via digital or mobile technology is more prevalent now. Jo Maguire or Alex Hynes will probably be able to give you a more definite answer. Since the 1990s, when privatisation started, ticket office sales have fallen year on year, from about 40 per cent to under 20 per cent.

The Convener: I am not disputing the points that people have made about security and looking after railway stations. I am simply interested to know how many people buy tickets at a station rather than using the technology that we have to do it online.

Mick Hogg: ScotRail advises us that not many people buy their tickets at booking offices. However, as Gary Kelly rightly said, it is not just a question of selling tickets—there are other productive activities that rail staff perform.

The Convener: I made that point. I understand that the role of booking office staff is not just about selling tickets. I was simply interested in finding out what proportion of tickets were sold at booking offices. It might be a question of repurposing roles, rather than staff necessarily selling tickets, given the importance of keeping people there.

Gary Kelly: But they already do the work that goes beyond selling tickets, so I do not know that they need to be repurposed. The issue is about when they are at the station. The proposal was to take them out of the station at certain times if they were not selling tickets. They already do the work that goes beyond selling tickets.

The Convener: I very much take that point.

Monica Lennon: I am concerned about what the witnesses—especially Mick Hogg—have said about not wanting to say to future ministers, when someone has lost their life on Scotland's railways as a result of antisocial behaviour, "Told you so."

I looked back at the evidence that we took from Jenny Gilruth and Government officials. The issue of the trends that we are seeing was raised, along with the limitations on the British Transport Police and the particular concerns about the safety of women and girls on trains and at stations. That was supposed to be looked at as part of a national conversation. Can you give an update on that? What engagement has there been?

Earlier, Mick Hogg mentioned that people will not use the trains if they believe that antisocial behaviour is out of control. Is it already out of control?

Mick Hogg: I would say that it is; in my view, it is getting worse. As a trade union, we continually receive updates on antisocial behaviour and assaults from our members and representatives.

There is a lot of talk about what we intend to do to address antisocial behaviour. I am not suggesting—none of the rail unions is suggesting this—that we will ever eradicate antisocial behaviour, but the issue has become a magnet for people who use Scotland's railway to cause havoc. There are not enough British Transport Police officers; I think that there are 246 or 256 of them. We are not suggesting that the British Transport Police has the resources to be able to put officers on every train, but we need it to have a more visible presence on trains.

ScotRail will probably say that there are safe travel team personnel. That is true. We welcome

the presence of those staff, because it gives reassurance to the train driver and the train guard.

The issue is getting worse, and we need all parties and stakeholders to take a joined-up approach to address it.

We probably need a change to the legislation to give the police more powers. The British Transport Police has told us on countless occasions that, after officers take back juveniles to their parents, in the space of an hour or two, the same juveniles are back at the train station causing havoc. We need legislation to ensure that those who are responsible are dealt with robustly.

Monica Lennon: A Government summit that will look at violence in schools and antisocial behaviour involving young people is due to take place. Does the focus need to go beyond schools to look at what is happening in the wider community?

Mick Hogg: Absolutely—100 per cent. We need to have a joined-up approach. My understanding is that, from ScotRail's perspective, the approach to schools is limited. I do not think there is enough engagement with schools and communities about young people's behaviour. There needs to be a better approach to engagement with schools.

Finally, I note that the national conversation made a lot of promises but delivered nothing.

Monica Lennon: I was not sure whether I had missed the national conversation, so I was hoping that you guys would be able to update us. I know that Jenny Gilruth said quite a lot about the safety of women and girls, the public more widely and staff. Will Gary Kelly and Kevin Lindsay provide an update on that? Also, what is morale like for staff just now?

Gary Kelly: The last time we met Jenny Gilruth, she advised that work had been done in relation to the consultation on women's safety and a report had been published.

The national conversation has always been in the background. We received a letter from, I believe, Kevin Stewart, the new minister, which outlines that the national conversation will take place in the summer. We as trade unions have asked for a copy of the terms of reference for the national conversation. As far as we understand, it will encompass the fair fares review, and, no doubt, there will be a wider public consultation on women's safety.

The piece of work that has already been done was a closed consultation—it was more of a research project, but various stakeholders were consulted. However, as far as I understand it, there has been no wider public consultation on women's safety.

As far as I understand it, the national consultation on women's safety, the national consultation on fair fares and the national conversation are all rolled into one, and the latter is more about what sort of railway we would like to see running, which would encompass issues such as booking offices. That is all scheduled to run in summer.

We as a trade union have asked for more information about the terms of reference and for specific timelines. However, I think that the change of minister has held that up.

Monica Lennon: That is a really helpful update. I am not sure that we as a committee had been told that.

Kevin Lindsay: I will come in quickly here. Gary Kelly has covered the national conversation. On antisocial behaviour, I asked the British Transport Police how many people have been arrested, charged or prosecuted for pulling a passenger communications alarm. Everyone who uses a train will have seen what the panel says: you will be fined if you pull the passcom. Passcoms are pulled day in, day out across Scotland's railways. Not one person has ever been charged, prosecuted or fined for doing that. However, the BTP has given us an assurance that it will now treat that as a crime that it must deal with.

I always raise that as an issue because, once a train is stopped, every person's journey is disrupted. It then brings the person who has pulled the passcom into direct conflict with the driver or the guard who must reset it. That generally leads to issues to deal with such as people vaping, putting their feet on the seats, drinking, not having a ticket, spitting or committing assault. The pulling of the passcom—a minor issue—is the flare-up point for the rest of that behaviour.

Another thing that happens regularly but nobody has ever been prosecuted for is letting off fire extinguishers on trains. Again, that disrupts travel for the people on the train. My greatest concern is what will happen if there is a fire on a train but someone has previously let off the fire extinguisher. That could lead to deaths. It is not a big probability, but that probability is there. I have asked ScotRail for an updated risk assessment on that, because the issue is on-going. The low-level antisocial behaviour is the trigger point for bigger antisocial behaviour.

10:30

One final point that I would make is that not every train has two members of staff on it. Many of the trains in the Strathclyde area have one member of staff. ScotRail's agreement with Scottish Rail Holdings is that it must roster a second person on every train, but that does not

guarantee that there will be a second person on every train. Therefore, the driver could be at the front not knowing what is going on behind. There are all sorts of issues with that. It affects accessibility for people with disabilities, as well as safety for women and children and the rest of the general public. For a long time, we have been pushing to make two members of staff compulsory, so that a train cannot run without two people on it—a driver and another member of staff—because we want to make the railway as safe as possible.

Monica Lennon: Safety is critical.

Gary Kelly: Can I—

Monica Lennon: I will let you back in, and then I will have to hand back to the convener, because we are watching the clock.

Gary Kelly: Sorry. I have just two points. My understanding is that there has been a reduction of 20 to 25 per cent in the number of BTP officers in Scotland since 2014, which has had an impact on antisocial behaviour.

We have previously had a discussion of banning orders. Another measure that could be looked at is something similar to section 156 of the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022, under which an assault on someone who is providing a public service is an aggravating factor in sentencing. That might deter people from assaulting public transport workers. That legislation is in place south of the border and could be considered here.

Monica Lennon: Thank you.

The Convener: I am going to wrestle this back to try to let Liam Kerr in, as he has been waiting patiently.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): Good morning, panel. I will come to Mick Hogg first. The RMT submission highlights the need for considerable investment in Scottish rail and demands an increase in that investment, rightly flagging up the Carmont tragedy, which I will return to in a second. Given Robert Samson's comments about ticket prices, should the investment come from the Scottish Government, now that it owns Scotland's railway and, if so, from where should it draw that increase in funding?

Mick Hogg: I am not really too fussed where the investment comes from. What has come over loud and clear is that Scotland needs a significant investment in Scotland's railway. We have Victorian infrastructure, and we need investment and more jobs. There has been talk about having less investment and fewer jobs when we come out of control period 6 and approach CP7. If we are serious about ensuring that there is not another railway disaster like the one at Carmont near

Stonehaven, we need to learn the lessons. If we do not learn the lessons, there will be other rail disasters in Scotland.

I will finish on this note. We have nothing to thank the pandemic for but, if it was not for the pandemic, I am convinced that a lot more than three people would have lost their lives on that fateful day because the train would have been jam packed and hundreds of people would have lost their lives. You can bet your bottom dollar that a lot of heads would have rolled as a result.

Liam Kerr: I will stay with Mick Hogg and the tragedy at Carmont—that awful event in 2020 near Stonehaven. Just last week, it was revealed that only two of the 20 recommended actions have been taken following that tragedy. Now that the Scottish Government owns the railway, is it sufficiently taking into account the new risk from, for example, the climate emergency that concerns this committee? Are the Scottish Government's budget decisions appropriate, given that 18 of the 20 actions remain untaken?

Mick Hogg: My quick and simple answer is no. That only two recommendations have been taken forward from a total of 20 is a scandal, as far as I am concerned. The railway unions and the families who have lost loved ones will be appalled at how the recommendations have been addressed so far. Not learning the lessons of that railway accident has all the hallmarks of the potential for such an accident to happen again, sadly.

We need action and we need those 20 recommendations to be addressed. What we do not need is less investment and fewer jobs in maintenance. We need more investment and more jobs in order to ensure that we run a safe railway.

Kevin Lindsay might well touch on this issue: the high-speed trains are 50 years old. It is a joke—an absolute nonsense—that we use 50-year-old trains. The managing director of the ScotRail Alliance has been quoted on many occasions as saying that the railway is

“the best railway Scotland has ever had”.

It is the worst railway that Scotland has ever had. We need more investment. We do not need 50-year-old trains.

Liam Kerr: Kevin Lindsay, perhaps you would like to take that point on the HSTs that run up to Aberdeen?

Kevin Lindsay: Can I just go back?

Liam Kerr: Sure.

Kevin Lindsay: There are 20 Rail Accident Investigation Branch recommendations. The industry is working through them. It is not unusual at this stage, a year later, to have ticked off only

two. There are national and Scottish working groups to deal with them. Two out of 20 seems terrible, but it is not unusual. Whether that is acceptable is another argument. However, I am sure that, as an industry, in which we all participate, we will get through the recommendations. Whether the Scottish Government implements the recommendations is the key part of it.

The HST is 47 year old. It is no fit for purpose. It is the most polluting train in the UK. Why it was allowed to come to Scotland is a question that needs to be looked at. Abellio won the franchise bid over National Express. At the time, there was less than 1 percentage point between them in the award of the franchise. I would like to know who in Transport Scotland allowed that decision—because, ultimately, that was what brought HSTs to Scotland.

I genuinely believe that the Carmont crash—and it was a crash—was caused by the failure of Network Rail to maintain the infrastructure, the failure of ScotRail to follow its own policies and the failure of Transport Scotland to protect the people of Scotland by allowing that heritage rolling stock to come to Scotland.

More than two year ago, we informed ScotRail, Transport Scotland and various transport ministers that we were gonnae boycott HSTs from 12 August this year unless there were significant improvements in them. At this moment, we have not received enough information on what improvements there will be and, as such, we are looking to boycott those trains from 12 August. We have further meetings with the Carmont HST steering group, in which I participate, and we will let that run its course, but the likelihood is that, come 12 August, ASLEF will instruct all our members not to touch those trains, based on their crashworthiness.

The crashworthiness of those trains arises because they are from the 1970s. They do not meet modern standards. They are a fibreglass shell at the front, with a wooden frame. Who would build a train like that nowadays? It would not be done. Who would want to travel at 125 mile an hour sitting inside that? It is no good enough. Those trains should never have been in Scotland. I would love to know who made that decision. Who thought that it would give us a modern railway?

I am sorry, convener.

The Convener: No, no, Kevin, I see and hear your passion, but I have to mix the committee up to make sure that all members get their questions in. I think that Liam Kerr has one more question.

Liam Kerr: I have one more question, convener. I am very grateful for that answer, incidentally.

Robert Sansom, people in the north-east were promised £200 million to invest in rail in 2016. The intention was to shave 20 minutes off journey times to the central belt, which would give better flexibility in the timetables, a better experience for the staff and a better experience for the passengers. I believe that just over 1 per cent of that has been spent and that, of course, the outcomes have not yet been delivered.

After one year of Scottish Government ownership, which does not appear to have had an impact on the spending of the £200 million, how are passengers feeling about the 20-minute saving not being delivered? Is that having an impact on the recovery of our railway? Do you get a sense that the money will be delivered and that 20 minutes will be shaved off journey times?

Robert Samson: We do not have a sense of when the money will be spent. One of our top 10 priorities is quicker journey times, but that comes after punctuality, reliability and frequency—those are the main priorities for passengers. Quicker journey times would have the greatest impact on modal shift between Aberdeen and the central belt. That would be one of the greater drivers to get non-users on to the rail network. Existing passengers who use the network just now are more interested in having cheaper tickets, having a punctual, reliable and frequent service and being able to get a seat on the train. Those are the main issues before we get to quicker journey times. However, in order to meet other Government objectives and get more people on to public transport, we definitely need to pull the lever to get quicker journey times.

Liam Kerr: I just want to be absolutely clear. If that money was spent and the 20-minute saving was delivered, could there be a significant modal shift between Aberdeen and the central belt?

Robert Samson: There would be some modal shift. I do not have the percentages in front of me, but one of the main drivers for non-users changing mode is faster journey times.

Liam Kerr: I am very grateful for those answers.

The Convener: Mark Ruskell can ask a short question to one person.

Mark Ruskell: An issue relating to the Illegal Migration Bill's effect on transport workers has been raised with me. It appears that the bill will, in effect, require transport workers to assist with Home Office deportations. Have your members raised that issue with you?

The Convener: Who is that aimed at? It can be aimed at only one person.

Kevin Lindsay: I will take it, because train drivers are in charge. We would just refuse to assist with deportations, full stop. The policy is

absolute nonsense. It is ridiculous to expect a train driver to go back and manhandle a person on a train.

Mark Ruskell: Thank you.

The Convener: I thank all the witnesses for coming this morning. Your passion for the subject has been clear to all. Thank you for your evidence and for explaining to me the complex structure of how the whole system works.

I briefly suspend the meeting to allow for a change of witnesses.

10:42

Meeting suspended.

10:47

On resuming—

The Convener: We will now hear from a panel of Scottish train operators. I am pleased to welcome Alex Hynes, managing director of Scotland's Railway; David Lowrie, chief executive officer of Scottish Rail Holdings Ltd; Joanne Maguire, chief operating officer of ScotRail Trains Ltd; and Liam Sumpter, route director at Network Rail Scotland. Thank you for accepting our invitation to attend.

Before we begin questions, Alex Hynes will make a short opening statement on the panel's behalf. While you are at it, will you help me? During the previous panel session, I was confused and muddled about who does what and who reports to whom, as were the union representatives. Will you explain that briefly while making your opening statement?

Alex Hynes (Scotland's Railway): Of course. Good morning and thank you for giving us the opportunity to set out the work that we are doing as Scotland's Railway—that is ScotRail, Network Rail Scotland and Scottish Rail Holdings—to deliver a safe, reliable and green railway that provides value for passengers and taxpayers.

From the moment that the Scottish Government announced that ScotRail would return to public ownership on 1 April last year, a key priority was ensuring a smooth transition. Scottish Rail Holdings, which is at arm's length from the Government and is responsible for the oversight, governance and stewardship of ScotRail, successfully co-ordinated the transition from private to public ownership with no disruption to passengers or our staff. We are proud of that achievement, because it did not happen by accident—it took brilliant work across our three organisations and work with Transport Scotland, the Scottish Government, our staff, our trade union

partners, our suppliers and more to make that happen.

The first year of public ownership was not without its challenges. The industrial action on pay that was faced initially by ScotRail and then, with greater impact, by Network Rail across Britain, resulted in significant disruption for passengers. However, as we sit here today, both disputes are now resolved, and ScotRail staff are voting on pay deals that have been recommended to them by ASLEF and the RMT, which are the trade unions that represent the vast majority of our front-line teams. That is significant progress.

We are making progress in three other key areas. Passenger numbers are increasing, punctuality is improving and revenue is growing. We are not out of the post-pandemic woods yet; travel patterns have changed significantly, but things are heading in the right direction.

Getting people out of their cars or encouraging more commuter and leisure travel by train is vital to supporting the Scottish Government's decarbonisation targets, increasing revenue and reducing Government subsidy. Public ownership gives us the opportunity to plan for the railway's long-term future, rather than the life cycle of a seven-year private franchise. The upcoming peak fares trial is a good example of doing things differently under our new ownership arrangements.

We are proud of our role in connecting communities, growing Scotland's economy and meeting the country's climate change targets, which aligns with wider Scottish Government objectives. The first year of public ownership provides us with a strong foundation on which to build.

The Convener: Were you going to help me by explaining who does what, which I found difficult to understand in the previous session?

Alex Hynes: Of course. As we know, the rail industry in Britain is more fragmented than most people would like it to be. Network Rail runs the infrastructure in Scotland and ScotRail runs the trains in Scotland. I have a joint role to oversee both ScotRail and Network Rail in Scotland. Scottish Rail Holdings is responsible for the oversight, governance and stewardship of ScotRail.

The Convener: For my understanding, do you report to the Minister for Transport?

Alex Hynes: Not directly. I have a dual reporting line—one is to Network Rail and one is to ScotRail. David Lowrie chairs the ScotRail board, which is a job for Scottish Rail Holdings. That is the arm's-length company that the Scottish Government established to oversee the newly

nationalised ScotRail and, from next month, it will oversee the ownership of the Caledonian sleeper service, too.

The Convener: For my understanding, what is your role within that?

Alex Hynes: I am the managing director of ScotRail and the managing director of Network Rail in Scotland, because ScotRail and Network Rail have an alliance agreement with each other. That is because we believe that track and train working together delivers better outcomes for passengers and taxpayers, and that is one of the many reasons why ScotRail outperforms its peers on efficiency, customer satisfaction and reliability. In our fragmented GB railway system, we have found a way of working for Scotland.

The Convener: So if an issue is on track, you go to the minister, and if it is on passenger service delivery, David Lowrie goes to the minister. Is that right? Perhaps I am complicating things; I am trying to see what the pyramid looks like.

Alex Hynes: Liam Sumpter, Jo Maguire and I run the railway on a day-to-day basis. That is our job. Scottish Rail Holdings is responsible for the governance and oversight of ScotRail trains, and the Scottish Government makes the key strategic and policy decisions.

The Convener: Who do you report to?

Alex Hynes: I have a dual reporting line—one is to David Lowrie as the chair of the ScotRail board and the other is to Andrew Haines, who is Network Rail's chief executive. That is because we believe that track and train working together delivers better performance, as we can demonstrate.

The Convener: I am trying to understand the reporting structures. The more complicated they are, the more difficult it is to see a way through. You think that the structures work, but I was under the impression that the unions do not think that they work or think that they are opaque. The unions tried but struggled in part to explain the structures.

Alex Hynes: Our trade union partners' commentary relates to the complexity of the rail structure across GB, which is nothing to do with us. Our job is to do the best job that we can for passengers and taxpayers in the existing industry structure.

The Convener: Ash Regan will ask the first questions.

Ash Regan (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP): Transport Focus identifies value for money as passengers' number 1 priority, but it found that only 65 per cent of ScotRail passengers considered their trip to be value for money. I am interested in your views on that. What are your

organisations doing, collectively or individually, to lower the cost of rail travel?

Alex Hynes: I will start and may bring in others. Clearly, passengers primarily care about two things: one is the price of the ticket and the other is punctuality. We work hard on both at all times.

The Transport Focus independent survey shows that customer satisfaction with ScotRail is at 90 per cent, which is one of the highest rates of operators across Britain, but we know that we can make it better. Value-for-money scores were a little bit lower. Fares across ScotRail are on average around 20 per cent lower than fares elsewhere in the UK, which is good news for passengers, and we have frozen ScotRail fares since January last year, recognising the cost crisis that the economy and society face right now.

As I mentioned in my opening statement, we intend to undertake a trial in October in which we will abolish peak fares across the network for a period of six months. Improving the service and the value for money for passengers is right at the heart of our strategy for delivering for the people of Scotland.

Ash Regan: Who else would like to answer?

David Lowrie (Scottish Rail Holdings Ltd): I can come in, too, if you like. One has to remember that there are a number of things around policy out there—we might touch on them today—and policy is a matter for Government. One aspect that is relevant to the question is the balance between fares from fare-paying passengers and subsidy from the Government for operation. We have to balance those priorities, and the balance at any particular time is a matter for Government—if the Government wants to spend more subsidy, it could reduce fares, and vice versa.

Joanne Maguire (ScotRail Trains Ltd): We are committed to providing the best service possible to the travelling public. As David Lowrie said, cost efficiency is a matter for Government policy.

We review our timetable twice a year. Just last year, we conducted our largest-ever public consultation on our timetable as we emerged from the pandemic, which is another example of the ways in which we are committed to providing the best value service for customers and being there when they need us.

Ash Regan: Can you explain to the committee the link between timetable and fares?

Joanne Maguire: My answer was specific to the public perception around value for money. We consistently get feedback around where demand for our services sits and how that demand links to value for money.

Ash Regan: Does Liam Sumpter have anything to add?

Liam Sumpter (Network Rail Scotland): Within Network Rail, one of our five strategic priorities is to contribute to a reduction in the net cost of the railway, because we recognise that operating, maintaining and renewing infrastructure is a really expensive business.

At the moment, we are developing our strategic business plan for the next five-year period, which starts in April of next year. As part of that plan, we are committing to several hundred million pounds-worth of efficiencies that will help to drive down the overall net cost of the railway, so that we can ensure that no further burden is placed on the Scottish taxpayer.

Ash Regan: Clearly, the pandemic had quite a profound effect on the number of rail passengers. The situation is perhaps beginning to settle into what we might call a new normal for numbers of rail passengers. Has enough been done to adjust services to meet those new travel patterns? It would be helpful if you could also give the committee an idea of the implications for rail finances of the changes in traveller numbers.

Alex Hynes: I will take that initially. Since the pandemic, we have seen extraordinary changes in the pattern of demand for rail services. As we sit here today, our peak business is down by 40 per cent, which is absolutely extraordinary, but our leisure market has recovered really strongly and is reaching pre-Covid levels. Broadly, we are taking about 80 per cent of revenue on about 80 per cent of the pre-Covid service.

We constantly look at the service that we provide to ensure that it is adequate for the way in which the market is bouncing back. Earlier this month, we changed our timetable, adding services where there was greater demand to operate. For example, we now run four trains an hour during the day between Edinburgh and Glasgow on a Saturday, yet we do not do that Monday to Friday. That would have been unthinkable three and a half years ago.

11:00

Whether in ScotRail or Network Rail, we are having to change our business to accommodate the new patterns of demand. For example, Saturday is now the busiest day on ScotRail. Again, that would have been unthinkable three and a half years ago. Between ScotRail and Network Rail, we have started to move engineering work out of Saturdays so that we can stay open, as far as we can, on the railway's busiest day.

Obviously, the impact on finances has not been good. At the height of the pandemic, our revenue dropped by 92 per cent. Every £1 that we lost in fare-box revenue was topped up through subsidy. Clearly, the Scottish Government is keen for us not just to deliver a great service but to reduce the requirement for subsidy.

As it happens, as things stand, we are very fortunate, because revenue is coming back quite strongly. Last year, there was quite a bit of industrial action around the network, which, thankfully, we in Scotland are now clear of, and we are forecast to remain so. That is a great environment in which to market and promote the product and get people back on trains. On Saturday just gone, which was very busy, we carried 300,000 people on the network. That was 50 per cent more than the year before.

Growing revenue and being efficient—as well as delivering a great service for passengers—are critical to reducing the subsidy requirement.

Ash Regan: David or Joanne, do you have anything to add?

Joanne Maguire: I come back to the fact that the world is continuing to adjust. We are not convinced that people have found a definitive position as regards hybrid working. The great thing about our timetable is that we change it twice a year, so we can continue to evolve and respond as passengers continue to find out what the new norm actually is.

David Lowrie: As colleagues have said, it is really important that we determine what the new norm is and that we provide services to satisfy that because, ultimately, our role is to provide the best rail services that we can for the people of Scotland.

Ash Regan: Liam, I did not ask you to come in, because I assumed that that line of questioning was more for your colleagues, but if you have anything to add, feel free.

Liam Sumpter: Thank you. Alex Hynes mentioned that we are looking at more innovative ways to take access to the railway to undertake engineering works. We are spending time to consider whether to move works away from weekends. Traditionally, we have usually done our work at weekends or in the Easter or Christmas holidays. If those become more popular times for customers to use the train, we want to be agile and responsive to that. We have a really big programme under way, which involves working with operators and customers to understand when it would be best to do our work so that we can more accurately reflect the changing travel patterns. We are very open to doing that, because we see it as part of our role.

Ash Regan: I am curious to know, if Saturday is the new busiest day in terms of passenger numbers, what the new least busy day is.

Alex Hynes: Sunday.

Ash Regan: Does that represent a change, or is that the same as it was before?

Alex Hynes: It is the same. However, one of the things that we did last year was negotiate a pay deal with ASLEF and the RMT, whose representatives you heard from earlier. Jo Maguire is the expert on this, so I will bring her in, but Sundays are currently not in the working week for ScotRail staff. As part of that pay deal, it was agreed with ASLEF and the RMT that we would work towards bringing Sundays within the working week by 2027. If that is successful, that will enable us to expand our Sunday service. We think that, because the Sunday service is relatively limited, it is suppressing revenue on other days as well. We want to be able to accommodate the leisure-driven growth in use of the railway.

Jo, would you like to say more about the working party on Sundays?

Joanne Maguire: We have a lot more in common with the trade unions than might sometimes, on the surface, appear to be the case. One thing that we are committed to doing is reducing our reliance on what we call rest-day working. We provide trains across seven days of the week, but we contract our staff to work across six days of the week. The working parties towards 2027 are focused on how we introduce Sundays as working days, so that we normalise that, and so that Sunday is one of the four or five days across which staff are contractually obliged to work. That will give us greater flexibility when we are looking at future timetable reviews.

Ash Regan: Thank you.

The Convener: Thank you. The next questions come from Jackie Dunbar.

Jackie Dunbar: Good morning. Members of the previous panel told us why they thought a challenge group should be created. What are your thoughts on that? Would you be keen to see that?

Alex Hynes: We work with Transport Focus all the time to listen to what customers are saying about our service. Increasing the volume of the customer voice in the way that we plan our service is absolutely critical.

Transport Focus undertakes the independent survey, and we got a 90 per cent satisfaction rating in its last one. We are proud of that, but we know that it can be better. Robert Samson and/or his colleagues are on our independently chaired stakeholder panel and we are keen to hear from Transport Focus about best practice or good

practice from other sectors that might help us to strengthen the customer voice in the way in which we run our services.

Jackie Dunbar: Sorry, but I am being a bit thick this morning. Does that mean that you would be keen to see a challenge group going down into the depths that the previous witnesses suggested?

Alex Hynes: We would absolutely support anything that increases the voice of the customer in the way in which we plan and deliver services. We saw the written submission from Transport Focus at the same time as you did, and we will talk to Transport Focus about what it said. We are always keen to learn from other sectors if there is an opportunity to strengthen the way we run the company.

The Convener: The next questions will come from me. The moving annual average performance target is one of the key assessments of how well the railway network is operating. The Scottish Government constantly said that Abellio was failing them—I remember Alex Hynes having to answer questions about that in a previous committee. We now have fewer trains and we are still not meeting the target. Can someone explain that to me?

Alex Hynes: Our target for train service punctuality is 92.5 per cent across the entire year—we measure it across the year because there are seasonal variations. Ever since the dispute between Network Rail and the RMT was resolved, we have been delivering really strong operational performance. We are delivering at that level currently, but the challenge is to deliver it throughout the calendar year.

We have seen the growing impact of severe weather on the network in recent years. Network Rail and ScotRail are working hard to reduce that impact. The issues are primarily around extreme rainfall and the impact of autumn. Now that management in both organisations is undistracted by industrial action, we can work together on the improvement plans to improve punctuality. As of this morning, we are at 89 per cent—a few percentage points shy of the target—and we must work together to improve that. We believe that the rate can be better and we need to make it so.

The Convener: One of the reasons why Abellio lost the contract was its failure to meet that target. I remember having lots of discussions with you about that in the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee in 2019. Now, we have fewer trains, so there should be fewer problems, which means that we should be hitting the targets, but we are not. Was it wrong to criticise Abellio? It seems that you are blaming the failure on the weather, which Abellio was never given the opportunity of doing. I

do not know the answer; I am struggling to understand.

Alex Hynes: As I mentioned earlier, the rail industry is a system and no matter what the structure or the ownership of the railway is, it is our job as railway managers to do the best possible job within the structure and ownership that we have.

One of the benefits of public ownership is that we can take a longer-term view. For example, a short-term private operator is probably not going to invest in the necessary resources to bring Sunday within the working week five years from now. That is an example of a situation in which our ownership allows us to take a longer-term view because we do not have to worry about the short-term interests of shareholders. From the perspective of Liam Sumpter, Joanne Maguire and me, our job is to do the best job that we can within the existing ownership structure.

The Convener: I still have not had an answer to the question. Abellio was reaching roughly the same targets that you are reaching now, but it was running more trains—so it was a more cluttered landscape—and it was criticised constantly by the Scottish Government for failing to reach the target. However, you are now saying that it is okay if that target is not met, because the service is in public ownership.

Alex Hynes: The ownership of ScotRail is a matter for the Scottish Government, so you would need to talk to them about why it took the decision to nationalise ScotRail at the break point. I do not know whether you—

The Convener: I understand that the Government will choose the ownership structure; I was just saying that we criticised Abellio for not reaching targets, but you are not reaching the targets at the moment, so should you not be criticised?

Alex Hynes: We should be held to account, which is why we are here. I guarantee that colleagues in ScotRail and Network Rail Scotland are working very hard on improving the punctuality of the service. I add that even though we are not hitting the target, ScotRail's punctuality and customer satisfaction outperforms most of its peers across GB. However, we know that it can be better and we will make it better.

The Convener: When do you imagine that you will reach the target that you aspire to?

Alex Hynes: We do not honestly know, because—as I highlighted—some things are not in our control. We are seeing climate change happening for real, and we now know that Scotland is being affected by climate change more than other parts of the UK. Not everything is within

the control of railway management. Our aim is to deliver the target as fast as we possibly can.

The Convener: Okay. It seems that I am hearing exactly the same story that I heard in 2019, just in a slightly different guise.

Liam Kerr: On a related point, how does Scottish Rail Holdings incentivise good performance by ScotRail, and equally, how does it penalise poor performance?

David Lowrie: Let us step back and look at what Scottish Rail Holdings is for: it is to help manage good performance and improvement, for the long term, on behalf of the Government. We have already touched on a couple of the issues that are symptoms of long-term issues.

As some colleagues said earlier, we are here to be expert railway people and to help to manage ScotRail trains on behalf of the Government and the public. We are the expert railway people. Some of that is about how we interface with ScotRail daily and in board meetings with—on my part—25 or so years of experience in the industry and seeing how things are done elsewhere. It is about encouraging good behaviours for the long term.

Liam Kerr: Thanks for that, but I am not sure that I heard an answer as to how you do or do not incentivise performance. When you say that you “encourage” better performance, does that mean that you sit in board meetings and say, “Come on, chaps—we must do better”?

David Lowrie: It is about encouragement, mentoring, discouraging things that might have an adverse result and taking the long view. One of the most important things that we can do is ensure that we have the right people running the business day to day. Why do I say that it is a long-term business? Our assets last 30, 40, 50 or 100 years, so the big decisions are made a long time out, and there is always an innate conflict between long-term improvement, such as electrification and greening and so on, and the day-to-day issues of the timetable or the fact that it rained yesterday or whatever. It is about how we address things in the long term and set long-term direction and tone.

Liam Kerr: Just before I hand back to the convener, I have a quick question to Alex Hynes. I think that what I am hearing is that there is no financial incentive to either promote good performance or penalise poor performance coming from Scottish Rail Holdings. For the avoidance of doubt, is any similar incentive scheme coming from any other body?

Alex Hynes: There is a performance regime that governs the performance of the trains across GB rail, so if ScotRail causes a delay it pays compensation to Network Rail, and if Network Rail

causes a delay it pays compensation to ScotRail. That incentivises both parties to improve punctuality. Scottish Rail Holdings holds ScotRail to account and the Office of Rail and Road holds Network Rail to account. One of the good things about working in Scotland is that Transport Scotland sets an identical performance target for ScotRail and Network Rail and the two teams work together to improve punctuality.

11:15

Liam Kerr: How does Transport Scotland impose a penalty if those targets are not met?

Alex Hynes: The ORR would take enforcement action against Network Rail if it felt that it was not taking all reasonable steps to improve performance. ScotRail management is held to account by Scottish Rail Holdings and, if targets are not met, we have to produce a performance improvement plan.

Liam Kerr: I understand.

The Convener: When Abellio was in charge, there used to be the service quality incentive regime fund, which got lots of money from Abellio in fines. That was used to increase and upgrade infrastructure across the network. Does that fund still exist and do you have to contribute to it? If it does not exist, has the Scottish Government made up the moneys that have been lost from that fund?

Alex Hynes: SQUIRE—as in the incentive regime—no longer exists. It was a function of the franchise agreement between Transport Scotland and Abellio ScotRail. In the grant agreement, which has replaced the franchise agreement, we now have a regime called service quality, which looks very similar but does not have the financial penalties and bonuses attached to it. I am pleased to say that our performance on that service quality regime is rather good right now. However, it is no longer a financial regime.

The Convener: I seem to remember that the SQUIRE fund did a lot of good to many stations.

Mark Ruskell: I will go back to industrial relations. The first panel that we had this morning were union colleagues and we got the strong impression from them that relations had perhaps turned a corner and were improving. Will the witnesses say a bit more about their impressions of industrial relations and whether they need to continue to improve or change?

Alex Hynes: This morning, the committee heard from three of the four rail trade unions that the overall impression of the first year of public ownership of ScotRail was positive. In fact, I think that one of our colleagues said that industrial relations had dramatically improved, for which Jo

Maguire, the chief operating officer of ScotRail, deserves a big amount of credit.

As Jo Maguire mentioned, we agree on most things—we want to deliver a great service for passengers, want the railway to grow and want to provide great jobs for our staff—so we agree that industrial relations have improved in the first year of public ownership. One thing that Jo Maguire and the team have been working hard on recently is this year's pay round. As we sit here, ASLEF and RMT members in ScotRail are voting on a pay deal, which the trade unions have recommended to our staff that they accept.

Jo, is there anything that you want to add on that?

Joanne Maguire: Yes. Thank you for your words, Alex, but none of it works without all of the parties coming to the table, so a huge deal of credit should be given to the trade unions and many of my management colleagues, who all work consistently hard. As many of the committee members will know, you do not do a pay deal by sitting down once a year and having a conversation. It is about day-to-day relationships and hard work from all sides.

Transparency under the public sector is certainly helping our industrial relations climate. We have just opened an employee engagement survey to get a temperature test of where our culture is at as a public sector employer. We remain committed to working with our trade unions. We will not always agree on everything, but that is not the deal. The deal is that they should challenge us and we should challenge them. As long as relationships remain constructive, we remain optimistic that we can work in partnership to deliver the best railway in Scotland. Whether it be our customers or our staff, our railway is about people, and that is what is important to us.

Mark Ruskell: That is very good to hear.

I want to switch back to the pilot to remove peak-time fares from October. It sounds as if one outcome might be that a lot of people start to get back on to trains again, which might be great for farebox income but might also lead to overcrowding—I do not know. How prepared are you as far as introducing that pilot is concerned? I guess that it is a little bit of an unknown, given that we are in the new normal and the peak has moved.

Alex Hynes: Obviously, it will be a trial, and one of the reasons for that is that we are not entirely sure how customers will react to the abolition of peak fares for six months across all routes from October. One of the things that we have seen is huge shifts in the market and, as you might imagine, all our experts are trying to predict the

impact of one of the boldest fare initiatives that we have seen anywhere across rail—full stop—let alone in this country.

As the range of outcomes will probably be quite wide, even the best modellers in the world will not be able to predict things with a level of accuracy. We will therefore have to be flexible so that we can respond, and where we need to add carriages and/or services, we will do so, if resources are available. Currently, though, some of our busiest trains are the first off-peak trains, because people have held back for the cheaper fare, and, to accommodate that, we will probably need to reallocate the way in which we use our carriages across the network. However, we still have spare seats available in the peak period across most of the network, and where we think that we will need to add more carriages or services, we will do so.

Mark Ruskell: Okay. Thanks.

The Convener: Monica, did you want to come in on that?

Monica Lennon: Yes, thank you, convener.

Both panels have talked us through the new institutional arrangements, how they are working and how they might be improved. I know that we are only a year in, but I am keen to pick up an issue that was recently raised in the Parliament. According to board papers that have become public, the former chair of ScotRail, Chris Gibb, who was also the chief executive officer of Scottish Rail Holdings—I hope that I have got that correct; he is no longer in those roles—raised concerns about micromanagement by the Scottish ministers, advisers and officials. David Lowrie, do you recognise that characterisation?

David Lowrie: Obviously, I cannot speak for Chris Gibb. As far as his leaving is concerned, he had a fixed-term contract and, as originally expected, he was employed by Scottish Rail Holdings for the entire period of that contract. In that sense, it was always anticipated, contractually, that he would leave when he did.

I have heard the phrases that you mentioned since Chris left. Before I knew that he was going, I had no conversations with him about that sort of stuff or about such worries—I do not recall such a conversation before he announced that he was going.

Monica Lennon: Let me just get this right. Back in 2022, you were the chief financial officer.

David Lowrie: That is correct.

Monica Lennon: We have heard a little bit about how the different organisations work and the different interfaces between them. Did you have contact with Government ministers and officials?

David Lowrie: I always have routine contact with the Government, various civil servants and officials and so on. I have met the ministers on several occasions, but the main contact is always with officials.

Monica Lennon: Okay. So you have had no concerns about micromanagement.

David Lowrie: Since I became chief executive officer and chairman of ScotRail, I have had no concerns in that respect. The relationships have all worked very well—we have got a good relationship with Government.

Monica Lennon: That is now, but has there been interference from ministers—for example, Jenny Gilruth—in the past? Has there been overreach?

David Lowrie: Government funds us, substantially, and it is quite entitled to make requests from time to time, because it sets policies, wants to implement this or that and whatever. We have plenty of requests and plenty of discussions with Government officials. That is the extent of it, really.

Monica Lennon: Yes. We would expect that interaction to be robust. There has been some discussion in the Parliament about the fact that there might have been interference or overreach on the part of ministers, but you do not have those concerns. You did not experience or witness that.

David Lowrie: The actions of ministers are probably a question for Government, rather than us as the operators and managers of the business.

Monica Lennon: Okay, but I am always keen to hear the views of our witnesses. I will leave it there, convener.

The Convener: I was interested to see where that was going.

Liam Kerr: Joanne Maguire, how will ScotRail go about procuring new rail stock? Will that be done through rolling stock leasing companies or will ScotRail do it directly?

Joanne Maguire: It is very early days with regard to our procurement journey. I will bring in David Lowrie, because we will do our procurement with and through Scottish Rail Holdings, as you would expect, because it sets governance and policy. However, I want to reassure the committee that we are hugely aware that these will be some of the largest investments that the Scottish Government will have made—and will make—for some time. When we procure our rolling stock, we are making significant long-term commitments on behalf of the Government, and we are hugely aware of our responsibilities as a public sector body.

With regard to the technicalities, it is very early days, but David might want to comment.

David Lowrie: Yes, I do. As Jo said, it is very early days. We hope and expect to acquire those assets some time in the next 10 years and that they will last for generations to come. Therefore, it is absolutely right to consider, with our colleagues in Government, how we fund those and the best way to do that. I would not want to close down any options at this stage, because we will need to appraise those—whether the stock comes from a rolling stock company, from internal funding or from somewhere else—at the time that we make the decision.

Liam Kerr: I will stick with David Lowrie. Transport Scotland has expressed that Scotland's railway should be decarbonised by 2035. Given the hopes and expectations that you have just outlined, how can you ensure that there will be effective decarbonisation by then?

David Lowrie: It is all about the steps in the road and how we plan for the long term. What can we do each day in the year to make things better? With regard to when decarbonisation will happen, we will only know that once it has happened. We have a series of decisions to make. In order to wholly decarbonise the railway, you would have to electrify every route, and it is a question for colleagues in Network Rail as to when they could do that. Once the network is electrified, we can have zero carbon trains on it.

Alex Hynes: In 2020, Transport Scotland published its “Rail Services Decarbonisation Action Plan”, which committed to removing diesel vehicles from the network by 2035. Most passenger journeys on ScotRail are already made on electric trains—we have already decarbonised most of the network, and we have a proud record on electrification here in Scotland. We are currently on site electrifying the railway between Glasgow and Barrhead, and we are electrifying the railway between Glasgow and East Kilbride. We will have electric trains running to Barrhead later this year.

Between ScotRail, Network Rail, Transport Scotland and Scottish Rail Holdings, we are working on the plan to decarbonise, which will see more electrification and decarbonised trains. We have a joined-up track and train plan for that. The 2020 decarbonisation action plan is due a refresh this year, and we are working with Transport Scotland officials on that.

David Lowrie: It is important to say that the biggest thing that we can do on that is to encourage a modal switch from, for example, road to rail, and we can do that only by providing reliable services that people believe in. That is what our union colleagues were talking about

earlier. We are all one community in that—we have shared objectives, which is why we all want to improve performance.

Liam Kerr: I will stick with Alex Hynes. On exactly that point, union colleagues were pretty clear that, although most journeys might be electrified, a significant part of the network is not and is running on 50-year-old high-speed trains. Earlier, the committee was told just how polluting those trains are, and we heard an example of that from Glasgow.

11:30

Kevin Lindsay also raised significant concerns about safety on the HSTs. After the Carmont incident, the RAIB made significant points about the HSTs. I am sure that Mr Hynes heard Kevin Lindsay's points about how crucial it is that they are replaced. What is being done to replace the high-speed trains? When will they be replaced?

Alex Hynes: We are already planning the renewal of high-speed trains, which are essentially the intercity fleet for ScotRail. As it stands, those trains are on lease to ScotRail until 2030, but we are looking at options to replace them earlier than that, in the context of the need to decarbonise.

Currently, the high-speed train that runs from Glasgow to Aberdeen is diesel operated all the way, even though we have wires to Stirling. Therefore, one thing that we are considering is whether we could procure a hybrid train, which would enable us to run electric, at least out of the city centres, and then move on to diesel power later. That is in the context of the overall deadline of decarbonisation by 2035.

Obviously, we are aware of ASLEF's concerns about the safety of the high-speed trains. Those trains are safe. They have a good safety record and meet all the requirements to operate safely on the GB network, but we recognise ASLEF's concerns and we are working with it constructively on those issues. In the coming weeks, we will be modifying those trains in line with the Rail Accident Investigation Branch report that was published in March last year. After the tragic accident at Stonehaven on 12 August 2020, we took immediate steps to reduce the chances of that happening again.

Whether it is the infrastructure, the rolling stock or our control centre and operational rules, we have already made the network a lot safer. However, we need to ensure that we track all 20 of RAIB's recommendations through to conclusion. In fact, we have a meeting with the trade unions on that next week.

Liam Kerr: Just to be absolutely clear and to reflect that back, you are saying that,

notwithstanding the RAIB report, ASLEF's concerns and driver dissatisfaction, it could be 2030 before Scotland's railway fully moves on from those HSTs.

Alex Hynes: Currently, they are on lease until 2030. If we wanted to replace them earlier than that, ultimately, that would be a decision for Government.

Liam Kerr: Thank you.

The Convener: That would require the development of new trains. I remember that, when the 125s or HSTs came up six years ago, you said that they were a great step forward. The new Hitachi trains took quite a long time to develop and come into service. We are now in 2023, so 2030 is seven years away. If the design process and the procurement process started now, would the trains be available by 2030?

Alex Hynes: Yes. Basically, from standing start, the process to deliver a fleet of new trains in passenger service takes about five years. We have already done some advance work on the procurement of a suburban fleet, for example, to enable us to retire some of our diesel trains in the next five years. In our rolling stock strategy, we have a clear plan through which, in essence, we procure new trains as rolling stock reaches its date of life expiry.

Our rolling stock plan is complementary to our infrastructure plan, so that we can deliver decarbonisation. The reason why we want more modern trains is not simply to deliver great services for passengers; we want decarbonised services as well. For example, with the Aberdeen to central belt project, we are already bringing down bridges on that route in advance of full electrification. That development work is being funded by the Scottish Government, even though we are not yet in full delivery mode.

The Convener: I have a final question before we move to questions from Jackie Dunbar. You say that the leasing contract lasts until 2030. Are there break clauses before that date, or are you tied in with significant penalties for breaking that lease early?

Alex Hynes: I do not have that contractual detail. Even if I did, it would probably be commercially confidential, because those trains are owned by Angel Trains. As it stands, they are on lease to ScotRail until 2030.

David Lowrie: It would be good to emphasise that one of the key words Alex Hynes used was "options". We are continually looking at options and de-risking. We are looking at how to reduce emissions in the long term and at what we can do in the short term, such as modal switch, to keep emissions as low as is reasonably practical. We

are bound to do that because of safety—those trains are safe—and because of our financial duty to provide value for money for the taxpayer. We are continually looking at options and working out the best and most robust way through this for the long term.

Jackie Dunbar: What plans do you have to improve the accessibility of Scotland's rail network, especially regarding improving access at stations and ensuring that new rolling stock allows level boarding from platforms?

Alex Hynes: We obviously want the services that we provide to be for everyone. We have a Victorian rail network, where that was not a priority, but we are investing heavily both in ScotRail and in Network Rail, to improve accessibility on the network.

We are very proud of the fact that we roster two staff on every train so that we can help people to board and alight. People with reduced mobility quite rightly want to be able to turn up and go, so when we procure any new trains in the future, level boarding will be a requirement of the procurement process. Where the platform is a standard height, that will deliver perfect level boarding between track and train. That is a medium to long-term investment.

We are investing in access for all schemes across the network and are fitting accessible footbridges to improve accessibility. We recently completed schemes at Johnstone and Croy. A couple of weeks ago, I was at Port Glasgow looking at a project to deliver an access-for-all scheme to improve overall accessibility there. That approach is a big part of our planning for trains and infrastructure and for how we operate services.

Jackie Dunbar: Will a lot of work be needed on platforms?

Alex Hynes: Modern rolling stock tends to have a lower floor, which is great news everywhere because that reduces the size of the gap to the platform. For example, on the Borders railway, which is a relatively new railway that opened in 2015, all the platforms are compliant with the standard, delivering perfect level boarding. When we undertake infrastructure work, such as to renew a platform or to create a new one, all new infrastructure is built to that standard and will deliver perfect level boarding if the train offers level boarding.

The Convener: Monica Lennon has some questions.

Monica Lennon: I am returning to the issue of antisocial behaviour. Witnesses on the first panel told us about some challenges and concerns. Mick Hogg of the RMT suggested that that behaviour is

getting out of control. He does not want to be the person who says, "I told you so," but he said that something really serious might happen and that there could be loss of life in the future.

Joanne Maguire, you have responsibility for safety so perhaps you can kick off. What are the challenges of antisocial behaviour? What is causing it, and what impact does it have on passengers and staff?

Joanne Maguire: You will not be surprised to hear that we talk to the trade unions about that issue a lot, and we are committed to resolving it. Our starting point, and what I have discussed with the trade unions, is that, unfortunately, antisocial behaviour is not a ScotRail issue or a railway issue but a much broader societal issue. I am sure that the committee is much better versed on that than I am.

We were encouraged to see that the Scottish Government will launch conversations in schools about violence in schools and what can be done to tackle that. We are committed to working with partners across the public sector on how we best tackle antisocial behaviour—a lot of which, unfortunately, is coming from younger elements of our population.

Whether an assault be on a member of staff or on a passenger, our strong view is that one assault is one too many. We want to do our best to protect all parties. We are working with the British Transport Police to look at hotspots and at specifically challenging areas. We have increased the numbers on our travel safe team, who work out and about around our network, with our on-train staff and sometimes in stations, to prevent antisocial behaviour. However, unfortunately, there are no magic or simple answers.

We were delighted that the Scottish Government recently backed our spending on body cameras, which are fast becoming an important element of our preventative measures, and there will be a threefold increase in the availability of body cameras for our staff from around September.

There are lots of different ways in which we are tackling antisocial behaviour. As I have said, we are very cognisant of the fact that it is a societal issue.

Monica Lennon: You have made a really important point. In our earlier session, we discussed the forthcoming summit on violence in schools. A joined-up approach would be smart. That has been helpful.

What more could we in Parliament do, and what more can be done across Government? I am looking back at what Jenny Gilruth said last year about discussions between ministers—in

particular, transport and justice ministers—on whether more legislation is required. Clearly, there is a frustration that offenders, including persistent offenders, cause havoc then get back on the train hours or days later. Could legislation play a useful part in better managing the access to Scotland's railways of persistent offenders who cause violent and serious disorder?

Joanne Maguire: Colleagues might want to comment further, but we in ScotRail are focused on what we can directly influence for our staff and passengers. One of our challenges is that, broadly, we run an open network, so it is impossible for the BTP, Police Scotland and others to be everywhere at any given time. We are committed to having the right staff in the right place to ensure that we drive down ticketless travel, for example, which is another reason for antisocial behaviour.

Policy and legislation are a matter for the Government. However, now that we are in the public sector, we are looking at multi-agency work. For example, we have been engaging with local authorities on how we can best partner with them to combat specific incidences of antisocial behaviour.

Monica Lennon: When she was the transport minister, Jenny Gilruth put quite a lot of focus on particular issues that have affected women and girls. What has been done to improve the safety and security of women and girls who travel on the Scottish rail network?

Joanne Maguire: A starting point is that we acknowledge the Scottish Government's study on women and girls who use public transport. We do not want anyone—women, girls or any of our users—to feel unsafe. We are working with the British Transport Police; as I mentioned, we have increased the numbers of our travel safe team; and we are looking at how we best man our stations and trains at times when safety may be a particular concern or in particular safety hotspots.

As I mentioned, we are committed to the issue and we are working in partnership with our trade unions. However, unfortunately, as with the broader societal piece, there are no magic answers.

11:45

Monica Lennon: Can the public be confident that there is a zero-tolerance policy against antisocial behaviour or criminality on Scotland's railways?

Joanne Maguire: Yes. We have made very public statements, which people may have seen through social media or through our various other ways of communicating, that we take a zero-

tolerance approach to violence against members of the public or our staff.

The Convener: The attitude is interesting. I had not realised that, although chains were pulled to stop the train on numerous occasions, there had not been one conviction. It seems that a complete mind switch is needed on what is acceptable or unacceptable on trains. We heard about spitting and feet on seats. Will you do anything to address that? It cannot just be about other people. You have to push on that, because it is all contrary to the culture of respect for the staff who have to operate the railways.

Alex Hynes: As Joanne Maguire said, since Covid, we have been replacing our body camera fleet. Using body cams is voluntary for our staff; it is up to them. We rolled them out six years ago, and they have been phenomenally successful—their use is increasing—and we are now in the process of replacing them. One reason why we are such strong advocates of body cams, if our staff want to use them, is that we can collect evidence that can be used in prosecutions—obviously, that is a challenge.

We now have a travel safe team, which is made up of 28 colleagues who support passengers and staff on hotspots on the network. That might involve particular routes on certain times of day, it might be event driven or it might involve good weather—people go down to the coast and come back having consumed alcohol. The team undertakes activity to try to keep the network safe for everybody.

The Convener: If I remember rightly, some of those cameras came from the SQUIRE fund. They would be a welcome addition to safety on trains.

Do you encourage staff to push for a prosecution if someone has behaved badly? I think that that is important.

Alex Hynes: We encourage our staff to take a body cam if that is what they would like to do while they undertake their work, because we know that, on the rare occasions when something goes wrong, the evidence that they obtain is absolutely critical to enabling us—or rather, the police—to mount a prosecution. British Transport Police is responsible for policing the network, which is why we work in partnership with it to keep the network safe.

Mark Ruskell: What are your plans for ticket offices? Maybe we should just call them station offices, because it is clear that the staff who work there do a lot more than just sell tickets. Where do those plans currently sit? There is widespread concern not just from the rail unions but from passenger groups about ticket office closures or changes to the times that offices are open, and about how that might impact on passenger safety

and the passenger experience. We heard from our first panel about antisocial behaviour and how having staffed stations might help with that. Will you give us a rundown on where you are with your plans, which, last year, were quite widely opposed?

Alex Hynes: I will bring in Joanne Maguire shortly but, first, I say that we are not planning to close any ticket offices. No decisions have been made.

A couple of years ago, we did a big review of the way in which we staff our stations. We made some proposals, on which we consulted, and we made some changes to those proposals in light of the responses to the consultation. It was a genuine listening exercise.

We believe that there is an opportunity to improve the visibility of staff for customers, to be more efficient and to grow revenue, as well as to reflect the fact that the way that people buy tickets has fundamentally changed over the past 30 years while we have not changed our ticket office opening hours. Today, 62 per cent of our revenue comes from self-service methods and 16 per cent from ticket offices, so it is about adjusting what our staff do and where they do it as customers change their behaviour. However, as I said at the outset, no closures are proposed and no decisions have been made. It is a matter for Government.

Jo, is there anything that you would like to add?

Joanne Maguire: The starting point is that, as part of last year's pay deal, we agreed that there would be six years' protection of the no compulsory redundancies policy at ScotRail. When we approach our station staffing strategy, we will engage comprehensively with our trade unions.

When we reviewed opening hours, we did not just look at the situation through the lens of ticket sales; we took a more holistic view. For example, we carried out a diversity impact assessment. Through that, we took our original proposals and added 167 hours back in where we identified that there was demand for assistance in boarding or disembarking from our trains. We did not just use the single lens of ticket sales.

When we have authority to progress, we will engage extensively with our trade unions and the input to the strategy will be important. However, it is about making our railway as safe as possible. It is about trying to decrease ticketless travel, which reduces our reliance on subsidy, but it is also part of our deterrent measures against antisocial behaviour. It is about staff being more visible, which is also a further deterrent to antisocial behaviour and an enhancement to our desire to be the most accessible railway that we can.

Mark Ruskell: Some time has elapsed since that original consultation and your reflection on it. We talked earlier about the new normal, the removal of peak-time fares and travel changing—perhaps consistently changing. Is your plan still fit for purpose? Might it change again? Is there clarity about what the demand on staff might be at stations?

Alex Hynes: The more time that elapses from the point at which we consulted on the proposal, the more some of the assumptions that we made become out of date because of the huge changes in demand patterns. To reiterate, we do not propose to close any ticket offices and no decisions have been made. If and when Government would like us to proceed with those changes, we will engage fully with the trade unions on any of them, which would include any changes because of the way that customers have changed their behaviour since we did the review.

Mark Ruskell: I am trying to get a sense of whether a Government decision is overdue, in which case, is it worth revisiting the whole thing again? If things have shifted, is it not better for Government to reconsider where we are now and then come to a decision or do you still want a decision sooner rather than later, based on your current proposals?

Alex Hynes: Our job is to run the railway as it is today. Key strategic and policy decisions, such as those on station staffing, fares and the peak fares trial, are a matter for Government, so those conversations about the finances and the service that we provide to customers happen all the time between ScotRail Trains, its owner—Scottish Rail Holdings—and officials.

Mark Ruskell: Okay.

Fiona Hyslop: Good morning—it is still just morning. Is it correct to say that you think that it is realistic for Scotland's railways to be decarbonised by 2035?

Alex Hynes: That is the current plan, yes.

Fiona Hyslop: In doing that, are you considering new alternative technologies, such as hydrogen or battery electric trains, or are those not sufficiently advanced to be part of your planning?

Alex Hynes: Yes, we are looking at alternative technologies. Our primary assumption is that, in order to decarbonise, we will electrify the network and procure electric trains. We do not just want to electrify ScotRail services, we also want to electrify freight, for example, as we are seeing strong demand for rail freight in Scotland.

However, we would never electrify some parts of our network, because it is just not economic to do so, so other opportunities such as hydrogen trains and battery trains are under active

consideration. Colleagues from ScotRail and Network Rail are talking to the suppliers of that rolling stock and visiting countries that already operate it to see what lessons we can learn so that we can decide what is appropriate for Scotland. Before the pandemic, I went to Germany to see one of the manufacturers of hydrogen trains that are in passenger service. There are some pros and cons to each type, whether you go with electric, hybrid or hydrogen.

One key obstacle to hydrogen is the cost. We want to make sure that, as we decarbonise the network, we do not add cost, because that would just increase the subsidy that is required from the taxpayer. We want to decarbonise, but we want to deliver a great service for passengers and be efficient at the same time. On trunk routes such as the central belt to Aberdeen or Inverness, we anticipate full electrification, but in other parts of the network such as the far north line or the west Highland line, the decarbonisation solution will probably be around the train rather than the overhead wires.

Fiona Hyslop: In those discussions with the Scottish Government and energy suppliers, did you consider whether, because the sources of renewable energy are in the north-east and the other places that you have just described, there might be a more integrated approach to take on delivering railway energy and train services in future?

Alex Hynes: Yes. As part of our decarbonisation plan, we are talking to electricity providers, because we are going to need a lot more of it. We need to make sure that they have the investment to prepare their network for that. For example, right now, we are investing £120 million in the infrastructure to work with power suppliers to upgrade the power supply in advance of electrification. We are also talking to the hydrogen sector in places such as Aberdeen, although not only Aberdeen. My understanding is that hydrogen economics work better when a number of industries club together in one space to drive down the cost and make it economic.

As we sit here today, we believe that the cost of operating a hydrogen train could be up to double the cost of operating a diesel train, which would clearly not be good news for taxpayers. There is therefore some work for us to do with the hydrogen sector to drive down the costs so that it makes sense for us.

Fiona Hyslop: On infrastructure issues, we have heard from the unions about their concerns about safety in connection with investment in the maintenance and repair of existing lines. Do you have sufficient capital to invest in that?

Alex Hynes: The short answer to that question is yes, and I will bring in Liam Sumpter on that shortly. The way in which the infrastructure is funded means that, every five years, the Scottish Government sets out the outputs that it wants the infrastructure to deliver and the funding that is available. In fact, in recent weeks the Scottish Government has just made a commitment of more than £4 billion to the operations, maintenance and renewal of the infrastructure in Scotland, which is a great vote of confidence in what the rail industry does here.

In Network Rail, we have a productivity scheme called modernising maintenance, which is about making the way in which we undertake maintenance of the infrastructure more efficient. We have recently concluded consultation on that with trade union colleagues in Scotland, and we are working through the safety validation. Those proposals are safe; if they were not safe we would not do them. The way in which maintenance of the infrastructure is currently undertaken is relatively old-fashioned and we are seeking to modernise it.

Liam, would you like to add anything?

Liam Sumpter: What I will say at the outset is that safety is our number 1 priority when it comes to maintaining the railway. We would never propose anything that we did not think was completely safe. I am talking not just about our internal view of safety; we go through hazard workshops with the Office of Rail and Road, which is our safety regulator and which will ensure that we are not proposing anything unsafe.

As Alex Hynes has said, modernising maintenance is about changing how we do it and making it more productive. Perhaps I can give you a quick example. With regard to the maintenance of the signals, points and so on, over 95 per cent of our tasks for maintaining the signalling infrastructure can be done by two people but, at the moment, our rules say that three people must be sent to every single thing. All we want to do in the future is send the right number of people, which will be two 95 per cent of the time, and more for the remaining 5 per cent of activity.

Those are the sorts of changes that we are making; however, although they will improve productivity, safety is our number 1 priority. That will not change, and we are funded perfectly adequately to continue to maintain the railway safely.

12:00

Fiona Hyslop: Finally, are any of your current major infrastructure projects not on time or not on budget? David Lowrie talked about the need for modal shift. Clearly, if we want to stop increasing numbers of commuters driving into Edinburgh, the

proposed developer-led Winchburgh station will provide good relief, and I am expecting to hear from Network Rail and others about the report that is being prepared at the request of the former transport minister and which will help set out revised costings.

So, there are two parts to my question—one national and one local.

The Convener: Local?

Fiona Hyslop: Local, but with implications for Edinburgh and the modal shift that David Lowrie referred to.

Alex Hynes: First of all, on the project side, we in Scotland have a proud record not only on delivering infrastructure projects on time and on budget—I would highlight the Levenmouth project, in which we are creating a brand-new railway that will open next year and which, with its new stations, will be incredible for that part of Scotland—but on driving down their unit costs so that we can deliver more lines of route and more new stations for the same amounts of money. We have a good track record in that respect. It is far cheaper to build a new station in Scotland than it is elsewhere in the UK, and we will be opening some more stations later this year.

On the specific issue of Winchburgh station, before the pandemic, I was able to undertake a site visit with you and others. The intention is for the developer to contribute to the development, and in the past few weeks, I have personally reviewed a submission between Network Rail and officials, which has only very recently been sent to Transport Scotland colleagues, who will no doubt be considering it. If we are able to secure an appropriate contribution from the developer of that scheme, there is no reason why we cannot build a new station at Winchburgh.

Fiona Hyslop: Thank you very much for that. I assume from what you have said that all the other major infrastructure projects are on time and on budget and that, indeed, you are getting more value for money than you were previously.

Alex Hynes: Indeed.

Fiona Hyslop: Thank you.

Liam Kerr: I am interested in that line of questioning about the delivery of projects. Alex Hynes will have heard me ask earlier about the Scottish Government's commitment in 2016 to investing £200 million to achieve a 20-minute reduction between Aberdeen and the central belt, and you will have also heard me say that, to the best of my knowledge, only just over 1 per cent of that money has actually been spent without our getting any deliverables with regard to that 20-minute reduction. It therefore does not sound as if that project is on time. Can you update the

committee on whether that £200 million will be spent and when the 20-minute reduction will be delivered?

Alex Hynes: The £200 million that you have referenced was from a city deal for Aberdeen; it was not money that Transport Scotland gave the rail industry, so we would not recognise it as a project that was currently in flight. However, we have a strategy for the Aberdeen to central belt line, under which we will essentially speed up journey times between now and 2026—and we are already putting in place infrastructure to help deliver that, particularly in the Perth area—as well as expand the gauge, or the size of the route, to enable the accommodation of more freight trains in advance of the electrification that we would like to put in place in the early 2030s.

One issue that we have wrestled with is that, although we are talking about Aberdeen city deal money, it makes more sense from a railway perspective to spend it outside the region than to spend it within it. We have a clear strategy for the route, but obviously such big investment decisions are matters for Transport Scotland.

We are doing all the design and development work for that Aberdeen to central belt strategy. You may have heard me communicate that at a recent stakeholder round-table meeting. Regarding delivery and advance work on the route, we are already demolishing the bridges that need to come down in order for us to electrify the route.

The Convener: There seems to be a whole heap of supplementary questions, which I am assured will be brief. I have never found a brief supplementary, but let us see if Mark Ruskell can buck that trend.

Mark Ruskell: I will pick up on the point about cost reduction, particularly in relation to new stations, and try to make it brief. It seems that there might be an opportunity to add more new stations to the existing rail network if there was a shift to using modular stations. Sites that have been mentioned to me include Torlundy, Evanton and Newburgh, where lower-cost stations could be brought in without having to build new railway lines. What are your thoughts on that? Do we need more innovation in expanding the rail network?

The Convener: That sounds like a short question.

Alex Hynes: Modular stations are a great idea in theory, but the rail network is not uniform. For example, there is quite a steep cutting at Winchburgh, so a modular station would not work there.

ScotRail and Network Rail have both learned by doing and by setting ourselves the objective of getting better each time. That is what we have done. We can provide a standard two-platform station here in Scotland for about £15 million, whereas costs of £25 million are quoted in other parts of the country.

Monica Lennon: I have heard concerns about ScotRail having an ageing workforce, with the average age of staff being around 48. What is being done to address that and how many apprenticeships will be filled this year and next?

Alex Hynes: I will invite Joanne Maguire to speak specifically about apprenticeships, because I know that that is an issue for the RMT and ScotRail.

We have a generally ageing workforce, which is one reason why both ScotRail and Network Rail are doing huge amounts of recruitment to replace people who are due to leave the workforce. In recent months, we have seen a slowing down in the number of people leaving us. There is no retirement age any more and there are cost pressures elsewhere in the economy, so people have stayed in employment for a little longer.

Both Network Rail and ScotRail have well-established apprenticeship programmes, not only in traditional roles such as engineering, but in other areas such as customer services and information technology. We have recently discussed the ScotRail apprenticeship strategy with the RMT.

Jo, would you like to come in on that?

Joanne Maguire: As Alex Hynes said, it is becoming increasingly difficult to predict retirements because there is no default retirement age. I heard murmurs from some committee members about the age of 48 being indicative of an ageing workforce. That is a concern for me and for others. We are seeing staff working beyond 65 or 70. Unfortunately, as Alex said, for some of them, that is due to inflationary pressures. Some staff who told us that they might retire this year changed their decisions.

We are working really hard on recruitment, not only into apprenticeships but across the piece. Many of you will know that Scotland is in the fortunate position of having even lower unemployment rates than the rest of the UK. Unemployment is really low just now, at less than 4 per cent.

We want to do more with apprenticeships, and not only traditional ones. I have been talking with the trade unions about how we can attract more young people and increase our apprenticeship numbers and about what we can do to offer—excuse my old-fashioned language—adult

apprenticeships to those in our existing workforce who want to upskill. They might be in our operational businesses, in our support functions or in areas such as engineering with which you might traditionally associate apprenticeships. We are hearing great ideas from our workforce about how we can upskill and offer apprenticeships not only to people joining us but internally. There is lots to be done and lots of ideas and innovation are coming through, and we are actively engaging with Skills Development Scotland and other partners.

Monica Lennon: That is great. If you cannot give us the numbers today, could you write to us to keep us informed?

Joanne Maguire: Of course we can.

The Convener: I am looking round the table but do not see anyone else who wants to come in.

We have had a wide-ranging discussion, and we have heard quite a bit about Edinburgh, Glasgow, Winchburgh and Aberdeen, but witnesses have failed to talk about Inverness, which is a subject close to my heart. The dualling of the A9 also requires the dualling and double tracking of the railway. That is an idea that we can develop outside this meeting.

Thank you very much for your time. I am sure that we will see you again.

12:10

Meeting continued in private until 12:37.

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