**RESPONSE TO TRANSPORT FOR THE NORTH STRATEGIC TRANSPORT PLAN**

**From: The Friends of the Settle to Carlisle Line**

**Overview**

Reliable and affordable integrated public transport is essential for rural areas, particularly if decarbonisation and decongestion is to be achieved and rail will play a significant role in providing this. Unfortunately most transport strategies focus on the combined authorities leaving rural areas neglected. Many of these are significant in size and usually include major tourist attractions.One such, the Settle to Carlisle Railway is a 72 mile long stretch of rail linking the city of Carlisle with the city of Leeds, via Settle, and traverses the Yorkshire Dales and the Eden Valley, both popular tourist areas with significant traffic problems. It links rural communities with their larger urban neighbours and provides essential routes to employment, education and recreation.

The Railway was built by the Midland Railway Co and opened in 1875. After losing its local passenger services in 1970, it was threatened with closure in the 1980s, and only a determined effort by the Friends and local authorities in Cumbria, along with a reintroduction of local services[[1]](#footnote-1) ensured that the Line was saved. Today it is a vibrant link between two great Northern cities and serves many isolated communities, with no other form of transport, along its length.

Our comments on the Strategic Transport Plan relate only to their effect on the S & C Line. We have not commented on all aspects of the consultation, but only on the ones which we see as directly affecting the Line.

We note that the Local Transport Plan for the area covered by the S & C could have been provided in advance but was not: nor was a copy available at the consultation event we attended in Leeds. This would have been helpful in compiling a response.

**Section 1 - Vision and Strategic Ambitions**

Enhancing social inclusion and health should be a primary aim in a time of economic regression, and affordable and accessible integrated public transport should be key to these aims, to enable citizens to access jobs, health facilities and social activities. Additionally it is key to achieving the decarbonisation strategy for the region.

 A socially inclusive transport system will mean **accessibility for all** and at present this is impossible for large numbers of travellers. Access to the stations is difficult due to poor roads, lack of connecting transport services, while the stations themselves have had little accessibility improvements since they were built. Work to enhance accessibility must be accelerated from its current pace: and footpath access from the road to stations such as Garsdale and Armathwaite, where paths are steep and unsuitable for those less mobile travellers must be improved.

The independent economic review is noted as having identified a widening of the productivity gap in 2016 between the North and other parts of the UK. An important part of this must surely be encouraging the local population to be able to access work and leisure via public transport, and yet on the S & C there are often gaps of up to 4 hours between train services linking Leeds and Carlisle. This limits accessibility to a wide range of facilities and discourages tourists who may wish to travel around the Dales and the Eden Valley. Trains are also frequently short formed, limiting the number of travellers which is another barrier to travel. A reliable commuter service would open up economic and educational opportunities for residents, but this is hampered by unreliable services and frequent cancellations: for example in March 2023 39% of “commuter” services on the Line were either cancelled or ran late.

The Decarbonisation Strategy could benefit from following Scotland’s lead by making bus travel free for all under 22 and other concessions. This has revolutionised travel for young people, who not only journey by bus in large numbers, but for the first time are discovering public transport and not going the way of previous generations by rushing to drive as soon as they are 17. A similar strategy could also be applied to rail services along the line. A move like this will not only decrease car use in the longer term, but has normalised the use of public transport in an age group who previously may have been reluctant to use it.

 Until fairly recently, local initiatives to provide connecting bus services to link the stations on the line with the wider community were widespread and the model used had attracted significant international interest.[[2]](#footnote-2) These , however have been significantly reduced since the pandemic.

**Section 2 - User centric and place based**

We question as to whether your place based scenarios include people in extreme rural areas, such as Dent or Garsdale. Without access to a car, they are solely dependent on volunteer run buses or the railway. It is therefore essential that the railway is reliable and offers frequent services and connects with an improved local bus network, that meet the needs of all users, not just those based in cities.

**Section 3 – Outcome Focused**

We agree with the outcomes but cannot see how these are to be achieved in a very rural area such as that covered by the S & C. Passengers on our railway already are at a disadvantage because of the infrequent services and their unreliability: up to 39% of services being cancelled or late running in one month, as noted above. In addition, the removal of the use of the Dales Railcard before 08.15 am acted as a deterrent to local use, although those at the south end of the line heading for Carlisle need to start early in the morning to arrive by 9 am. We feel that the outcomes should reflect the rural population of the North as well as the cities, and at present rural users are not considered.

The target to increase rail use from 1.5% to 2% seems very unambitious, given that more reliability in services coupled with increased frequency could do a great deal to encourage passengers to use rail more. In addition , the increase in Northern reliability from 84% to 91% does not go high enough, and passengers should expect a figure of nearer 95% as is the case with Scotrail, which operates across lowland cities and a huge rural area. It should be noted that significantly higher outcomes are targeted by other rail improvement schemes such as Restoring Your Railway where new services are proposed.

Accessibility from 54% of stations being accessible to all stations being accessible seems a very high target, as noted above under Section 1. We should be pleased to see this happen.

We would urge a move to integrated ticketing throughout the region which would also encourage use of public transport where it is available.

Active modes can only be achieved within urban landscapes. It is unrealistic to expect someone living in a high, exposed rural setting to use a bicycle or walk to a station – as noted in S. 7.

**Section 5 – Rail Priorities**

We agree with the priorities, and would make the following comments:

Connectivity – with the withdrawal of many supported bus services, the buses in the area are largely provided by DalesBus, organised by a volunteer team, with funding provided from a variety of sources. Although this works well at the moment, it is not sustainable to expect volunteers to run bus services, particularly to provide connectivity with all services. **A priority for TfN should be to seek restoration of supported rural bus services connecting with rail.**

More capacity – we agree. Trains on the S & C should have a minimum of 3 carriages as 2 are insufficient for passenger numbers and discourage people from using the railway at busy times if they think they will not be able to get a seat. Also a suitable non fossil fuel powered rolling stock solution should be sought to meet decarbonisation targets and improve the air quality along the route

Greater opportunity for freight – we agree. Freight has declined on the S & C over recent years but there is availability, especially overnight. New local sources of freight traffic should be explored as well as using the route for long distance freight.

Supportive of communities – The S & C strives to do this, but is held back by lack of connecting bus services, gaps in services and short formed trains. People want to use the railway but it is often very hard for them to do so.

Accessibility – as noted above, our stations are largely not accessible. Some have no bridges, no foot crossings and steep access as noted above.

**Section 7 - Local Connectivity**

We agree with the priorities, and consider that connecting bus services should be addressed as a matter or urgency.

A declaration that “active travel should be a choice for shorter journeys of up to 5 miles” can only apply in an urban setting. In the Dales, where stations are situated very high in the landscape (Dent 1,150 feet above sea level, Ribblehead 1,029 feet above sea level), active travel via cycling and walking can be difficult in an exposed position and in strong winds and driving rain. Even the Eden Valley stations are not all suitable for active travel to be the first choice for intending rail users. Your statement should be qualified to recognise that not all stations are in a level landscape.

We would welcome integrated travel across buses and trains: the first step though is to return bus services to the area – see section above.

**Section 9 - Implementation**

The priorities in relation to the S & C should be:

* Connectivity to buses and other rail services
* Reliability and increased frequency
* Improvement of services and a guarantee of a minimum of 3 coaches during the busier summer months
* Improvement in accessibility at stations
* Increase in local and long distance freight

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1. An initiative of the BR Manager appointed to oversea the closure [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This was pioneered by the late John Disney who provided a contribution on the scheme to a publication by the international public transport body UITP, see UITP.org. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)