



Scottish Association for Public Transport

SCOTTISH TRANSPORT MATTERS No 203

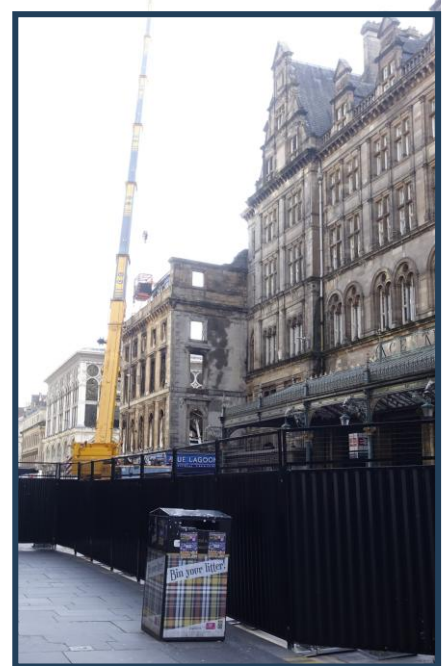
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Photos of an empty Glasgow Central, and blockaded entrance to the station and Grand Central Hotel from Gordon Street, following the fire in the Union Building (background) on Sunday 8th March.

Photos by Dr. Ann Glen



SAPT Transport conference and AGM

The SAPT transport conference and AGM will be held on **Friday May 22nd in Glasgow** at the Maldron Hotel, 50 Renfrew Street, G2 3BW. It's less than 10 minutes walk from Queen Street and Central stations and Buchanan Bus Station. See page 2 for details.

SAPT Membership

If you are not a SAPT member, you are welcome to join by visiting www.sapt.org.uk **Join Us** or contact us at scottishtransport@hotmail.com to request membership and pay subscription at the relevant rate:

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1

SAPT conference and AGM 2026

Friday 22nd May at the Maldron Hotel, Renfrew Street, Glasgow

- **13.00 Coffee/tea**
- **13.20 Introduction: Stewart Stevenson, SAPT President**
- **13.30 Dr Scott Arthur MP, Transport Select Committee**
Anglo-Scottish rail opportunities including HS2
- **14.15 John Birtwistle, Head of Policy, First Bus**
Key topics will include partnership delivery and new initiatives in ticketing
- **15.00 Colin Knight, Director – Innovation, Coventry City Council**
Coventry Very Light Rail Project – a game changer for conventional tram systems?
- **15.45 Vote of thanks by Professor David Murray-Smith and Close of Conference**
- **15.50 AGM – for SAPT members only**

2

Sparks Fly over Electric Buses

Award of the third and final round of the Scottish Zero Emission Bus Challenge Fund (ScotZEB3) has led to a threat by McGill's Buses to seek legal advice after its electric bus bid was rejected.

In the final phase of large-scale capital support for operators transitioning to zero-emission fleets, Transport Scotland has awarded £45 million supporting the introduction of 334 electric vehicles alongside charging infrastructure. Since 2020, £154m has been committed to the deployment of around 800 vehicles.

Ember is receiving £13m for 100 Yutong Chinese coaches. Stagecoach will get £4.5m for 44 coaches and buses. Lothian is to receive £9.5m for 60 double-deckers from Alexander Dennis/Volvo and Wightbus, while First Bus gets £6m for 22 double-deck buses (Yutong). Rock Road is receiving £11.5m for 93 buses which will be available for leasing by operators.

McGills is questioning the fairness of how the funding has been allocated. It is also opposing SPT's attempts to franchise bus services in Strathclyde.

Jo Bamford, chairman of UK bus builder Wrightbus, has attacked the Scottish government's decision to allocate the largest part of the £45m grants to buses from China.

The Scottish Government is exploring a regulatory approach under the UK Bus Services Act 2025 that could support uptake of zero-emission vehicles on local services from 2030.

3

RAIL SCOTLAND CONFERENCE 2026

By Scott Simpson

I attended the Peloton Rail Scotland Conference on 5 March 2026 at Radisson Blu Hotel in Glasgow, effectively as an observer.

Fiona Hyslop MSP, Cabinet Secretary for Transport was the first speaker, in her final major speech before stepping down as an MSP in the upcoming Scottish Parliament election. She described many changes, including public ownership of ScotRail, new ways of working and the ongoing relationship between NetworkRail and ScotRail. She also highlighted two major projects: Levenmouth reopening and Barrhead and East Kilbride electrification. More than £4.2 billion of expenditure is planned for Control Period 7 (CP7).

In other news, Scotland now has 760 kilometres of electrification with work taking place in Fife and in the Borders. HST replacement negotiations are expected to conclude soon. A new freight terminal is under construction near Inverness. Fares have been frozen for the next year. The Cabinet Secretary appeared content with the Railways Bill from the Scottish perspective.

Next up was Graeme Cook, Director of Rail Delivery at Transport Scotland. Graeme described his areas of responsibility as government oversight of ScotRail, excluding rail reform where Bill Reeve now takes the lead as Director of Rail Reform. Graeme described Covid as being a long time ago. There is now a 'new norm' with considerable changes in passenger trends. The decarbonisation plan has been revised to take account of budgetary pressures. First priority is to replace ageing diesel trains. In the longer term, net zero remains the target, with electrification the preferred option where possible.

Graeme commented that the present mixed fleet is harder and more expensive to maintain. Class 156 units have served Scotland well. HSTs also received a mention. The Class 170 Turbostar fleet is going well with a continuing role to play. Class 380 and 385 electric trains are performing particularly well. Transport investment is a significant priority for the Scottish Government (along with core skills development).

An interesting panel discussion took place on the theme of rail reform, including Mary Grant whom many here will remember as Managing Director of First ScotRail. During this discussion, Bill Reeve commented that the Railways Bill draws from experience in Scotland and echoed the view of the Transport Secretary that the ethos is broadly in harmony with Scotland's needs. Mary Grant emphasised the need for a long-term vision as regards rolling stock. For this reason, Porterbrook has acquired [in 2024] a significant stake in Brodie Engineering in Kilmarnock.

Other sessions were more technical in nature, reflecting the special interests of the sponsors. One presentation that seized my attention was from a company that uses cameras and machine learning to monitor the condition of the track. I was astounded to learn that the track can be 'filmed' while the train is travelling at 125 mph to provide images for analysis.

Scott Simpson

4 M8 Redevelopment through Glasgow

M8 Opportunity: The Scottish Government and Glasgow City Council are committed to reducing car traffic and CO₂ emissions. The Transport Scotland (TS) consultation (February 2026) on replacing the deteriorating M8 Woodside Viaduct is an opportunity to develop a plan to revolutionise travel and the environment across Glasgow, keeping in mind government commitments to encourage green travel.

The M8 carries 150,000 vehicles per day through the central section across Glasgow. This increases congestion and pollution through the city. Local access roads to the motorway are busy with fast moving traffic for much of the day making active travel in the vicinity difficult. There is a widely held view that the M8 route chosen in the 1960s through St George's Cross, Charing Cross and Anderston was not good, caused massive destruction and would not be acceptable today.

It's time for a rethink.

TS and Glasgow City Council both support the principle of reducing car use and road congestion by increasing walking, cycling and use of improved public transport. Yet many of the Glasgow City Deal projects are road improvements: Renfrew and White Cart road bridges, upgraded A82 at Bowling, new Cathkin Relief Road and A8/M8 corridor improvements in North Lanarkshire.

The preponderance of car commuting in Glasgow was identified in the Glasgow Connectivity Commission report in 2023. The commission recommended a Clyde Metro network of improved rail and bus priority routes across the City Region. A study of this led by SPT is still in early stages. Transport Scotland's M8 Woodside Viaducts consultation gave three long-term options:

- **Repair** (£125m - £200m). Existing structures would be strengthened.
- **Replace** (£200m - £500m). Reconstructed to modern design standards. Public realm and underlying road network could be improved.
- **Remove** (<£125m). Through traffic would divert via a lengthy route using the M73/M74. Local car and freight traffic would use city streets, greatly increasing congestion.

The TS consultation makes no mention of any initiatives to improve public transport which could result in better connectivity, modal shift, lower car traffic flows and reduce the scale of motorway capacity needed through the heart of the city. In particular, the number of motorway entrance/exits and design of junctions could be simplified and improved if more local journeys could be made by an improved public transport and active transport network which is the government's overall policy.

SAPT Recommendations to Consultation: The solution we favour is long term replacement of the Woodside Viaducts by a simpler and less expensive road with fewer junctions, designed as part of an integrated transport plan involving development of ClydeMetro, more bus priority lanes, improved rail services in the Glasgow City Region, and a huge expansion of Park+Ride interchanges across the wider area to give car drivers the option of switching to train, metro or bus nearer to the origin of their journeys.

The key to good public transport connectivity across the entire City Region is to co-ordinate bus, train, subway and future metro services, offering an integrated ticketing system enabling seamless journeys. SPT's Bus Franchising proposals are essential in achieving this objective.

Implementing Strategic Transport Projects Review

Transport Scotland's Strategic Transport Projects Review (2022) prioritised sustainable transport. Projects in Glasgow and the West of Scotland included local bus improvements and Clyde Metro.

M8 replacement design decisions should be consistent with STPR2. The focus should be on funding environmentally sustainable public transport developments including Clyde Metro to reduce the level of car traffic and planned road capacity through and into the city.

5

Tomorrow's Trains

Introduction: The ScotRail train fleet contains some of the oldest trains in the UK. Transport Scotland's *Fleet Transition Strategy* document (see Scottish Transport Matters 2025/3) is a welcome programme for replacement with low emission trains over the next decade, enabled by the progress of electrification.

But Scotland's world-class scenic rural lines may have to make do with cascaded elderly diesel trains. These compare poorly with modern European tourist trains like the Glacier and Bernina Expresses. Scotland's rural economy would benefit by having internationally marketable modern trains. Recent development of trimode trains such as in Wales and East Anglia could be relevant for Scottish rural lines.

ScotRail timetables need to be adapted to match the superior performance of new trains. And an increase in capacity and reliability on strategic single track routes can be unlocked by **two key additional passing loops on single track bottlenecks**. Objectives should be faster journeys and more regular and reliable connections, attracting more locals and tourists to use ScotRail's new train fleet.

This note reviews some of the issues affecting future trains and electrification.

5.1 Suburban Trains: Full electrification is the preferred solution for Scotland's busiest lines but the Transport Scotland strategy based on partial electrification with sections of battery operation is recognised to be the fastest and least expensive way of introducing zero emission trains across the rail network from the Borders to Dundee. The new trains, which are yet to be ordered, are an opportunity to give a step change in reliability, efficiency, accessibility, comfort, and capacity to relieve overcrowding.

5.2 InterCity Trains: The 22 refurbished 5-car Class 222 Meridian trains, now been announced by ScotRail to replace the ageing HST fleet, will, according to ScotRail, enhance comfort, accessibility and reliability. The ten year maintenance agreement for the trains should cover operation until about 2037.

5.3 InterCity Electrification: Based on the discontinuous electrification approach taken on Fife and Borders routes, around 130 route miles of electrification should be enough to support new electric/battery powered trains on InterCity Glasgow and Edinburgh to Aberdeen and Inverness lines. This assumes that, as in Fife, electric trains could cover 20 to 25 miles under battery power between electrified sections of similar length. **Electrification of 130 route miles should be realistically achievable by 2037** with new electric trains then replacing Meridians. By that time the Meridians will be around 35 years old.

5.4 InterCity Service and Fares: Comfortable and spacious seating with good visibility, quicker journeys, quality catering, high reliability and cleanliness should be keen competition for long-distance intercity bus services which are free for around half the population.

All InterCity routes should have hourly or higher frequency. The £57M **Highland Main Line** upgrade, completed in March 2019, was predicated on an **hourly timetable** but this has not come about. A standard pattern timetable should be developed for the new InterCity trains, taking account of freight trains. **A new passing loop at Ballinluig** on the long 13-mile Dunkeld-Pitlochry section would improve reliability.

To boost usage of the Scottish Government's investment in new ScotRail InterCity trains, the government should introduce a national ScotRail offer for concessionary card holders. For instance it could make economic sense to offer a **50% discount on rail fares for concessionary card holders**. This would narrow the discrepancy between rail fares and bus concessionary free travel, keeping in mind that every concessionary traveller choosing rail instead of bus increases rail revenue and saves the government from making concession payments funded by the taxpayer to private bus operators.

Right: Artist's impression of ScotRail Class 222 Meridian train. These trains are expected to take over InterCity services by 2028. Illustration provided by ScotRail



5.5 Rural Trains: Transport Scotland's rural category covers Dumfries, Stranraer and Inverness-Aberdeen routes as well as the West Highland, Far North and Kyle scenic lines. It seems likely that Class 170 trains, dating from around 1999, will operate all services in North-east and south-west Scotland.

This is a welcome development giving an opportunity to improve travel to Dumfries and Galloway, from the Central Belt and also from England via Carlisle. On the Aberdeen-Inverness line an hourly frequency should be a priority to give a more attractive green alternative to using the A96. **A new passing loop on the 18-mile Elgin-Keith single line** section is a priority for this line which interconnects two of Scotland's main cities.

Extension of electrification to the Nithsdale line in the longer term could provide an alternative diversionary route for Anglo-Scottish passenger and freight trains. Partial electrification to Girvan and on the Aberdeen to Inverness line could bring all these routes within range of battery electric units to replace Class 170s by 2040. But electrification of the WHL, Far North and Kyle lines is not likely, so a different approach is needed.

5.6 New Scenic Train Fleet Needed: Class 170 Turbostar trains are heavier than 156s and 158s and are likely to have lower speed limits on WHL, Far North and Kyle lines adding to the long journey times. Retaining class 158 trains would avoid this but these trains are already over 35 years old and reliability worsens with age. *Modern Railways Reliability Review 2025* shows ScotRail's diesel trains are over three times less reliable than modern low emission bi-mode electric/diesel trains like Greater Anglia's Flirt. The Scottish Government net zero target of 2045 implies eliminating diesel-powered trains by that time. In a worst case scenario, if Class 158s are still operating on Scottish rural lines until 2045 they will be 55 years old!

Many other European countries have invested in top quality scenic trains making rail travel a memorable experience and a tourist attraction. Scenery on the West Highland, Kyle and Far North lines is world class. What these routes need are modern trains with good visibility and comfort rivalling trains like the Glacier Express, Golden Pass Express, and Lotschberger in Switzerland.

Technological advances are extending the range of battery electric trains. Professor David-Murray Smith, SAPT Vice Chair and Emeritus Professor and Honorary Senior Research Fellow, School of Engineering, University of Glasgow, has produced a comprehensive review of electric self-powered rail vehicles (www.sapt.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/Review-of-Recent-Developments.pdf). The latest developments are progressing towards a battery/electric train with a range over 50 miles running on battery power (for instance by Hitachi and Siemens). However the 164 miles from Glasgow to Mallaig or the 175 miles from Inverness to Wick via Thurso are far beyond the current range of batteries.

A promising development that could be relevant to Scottish rural lines is tri-mode electric/diesel/battery trains. LNER has ordered tri-mode Class 897 trains from CAF, while Transport for Wales has replaced elderly Class 150 and 153 trains with a fleet of tri-mode Stadler Flirt Class 756 trains. Investing in a fleet of new state-of-the-art tri-mode trains for scenic rural lines would be a huge boost for sustainable tourist rail travel. If Stadler Flirt technology is used, the power pack consisting of diesel, battery and overhead electric power can be upgraded in future as technology advances. If a line is partially electrified in future the diesel powerpack can be replaced by a higher capacity battery powerpack to convert the train to a pure battery electric multiple unit (BEMU).



Above: Tri-mode Class 756 in Wales

So on the West Highland Line, for instance, trains could use overhead electric power from Glasgow to Craigendoran (23 miles), then battery power to Crianlarich (36 miles from Craigendoran), then diesel for the remainder of the journey. Future investment in partial electrification or fast recharging points as funding allows would progressively eliminate the need for diesel power before the 2045 net zero target.

5.7 Tomorrow's Trains: Summary

An electrification programme for Fife, Borders and Scottish InterCity rail routes matched by a fleet of new electric and battery electric trains could deliver an excellent zero-emission core rail network by 2037. Funding a rolling programme of electrification should be maintained by the Scottish Government so that capital costs per mile can continue to be reduced and train efficiency can continue to rise.

But Scotland's iconic tourist lines should not be left behind with old and increasingly unreliable diesel trains. ***We recommend that Transport Scotland should invite tenders to replace these trains with modern efficient and comfortable tri-mode trains. This would attract many more passengers to scenic rural lines and reinforce efforts by VisitScotland and NatureScot to grow the tourist industry which is pivotal to the Scottish economy.***

Contributed by John Yellowlees and John Wilson with excerpts from press releases collated by John McCormick

Ferry Crisis Worsens

Reliability of CalMac ferry services which has been worsening over the last few years has now, as of late March 2026, reached crisis level with eight major vessels out of action.

As of March 28th, four major vessels are out of action due to technical problems: Isle of Arran, the new Glen Sannox, the new Isle of Islay (experiencing teething problems), and Lord of the Isles

Four ferries are undergoing annual overhaul: MV Alfred (Arran), Loch Frisa (Mull), Hebrides (Uig-Lochmaddy/Tarbert), and Isle of Lewis (Barra).

This leaves only Caledonian Isles, Loch Seaforth, Finlaggan, Coruisk and Isle of Mull to cover Arran, Islay, Colonsay, Mull, Coll and Tiree, Barra, South Uist, North Uist, Harris and Lewis.

As well as ferry breakdowns, islanders and tourists have to contend with increasing levels of cancellations due to deteriorating climate conditions.

After the Scottish Election in May, the new Transport Minister needs to prioritise resolving this quite unprecedented level of failure. As well as ensuring the current fleet replacement programme delivers reliability improvements, there needs to be a review of the longer term sustainability of the current route network and continuing reliance on relatively few large vessels. Analysing the alternative options outlined at our last meeting in Inverness could be instructive.

Bus and Tram

Edinburgh Trams reached a record high in 2025, with 12.2 million journeys made. A daily record of 77,000 passengers was reached on August 9th.

A £2 bus fare cap pilot scheme has been introduced in the Highlands and Islands. There's no need to apply and no requirement to live locally. The £10 million pilot, funded by Transport Scotland, aims to make bus travel more affordable, easier to use, more appealing and supports local bus services across the region. But as it also applies to longer distance express bus services in the Highlands, it will inevitably affect the use of train services, also funded by Transport Scotland. Train use is already impacted by free concessionary bus travel available to around half of the population. After the Scottish election in May, the new Transport Secretary needs to develop a more comprehensive and holistic strategy for developing Scotland's bus, rail and ferry network.

Highland Council has introduced a new bus service to the Dalneigh area of Inverness following cuts by Stagecoach.

Lothian Buses is scrapping a direct bus route 46 from Rosewell to Musselburgh via the Edinburgh Royal Infirmary. Some trips on the 38 service are now almost 20 minutes longer than they were around 2005, an increase of almost a half.

Air

Airlines are facing a fuel cost crisis because of the conflict in the Middle East. The cost of fuel has so far gone up 68% in the last month. But Ryanair has forward bought jet fuel through to March 2027. Easyjet is 62% hedged.

Prestwick Airport has landed a £40m jobs boost from Ryanair. Around 450 highly skilled engineer and mechanic jobs, as well as 60 apprenticeships, will be created through a big expansion of Ryanair's maintenance facility. The Scottish Government will invest £15 million, with the UK government contributing £5m.

ScotRail is to introduce a £10 minimum fare for passengers who deliberately board trains without first buying a ticket, in a move aimed at tackling fare evasion and reinforcing what it describes as fairness for paying customers. ScotRail estimates that fare evasion costs Scotland's Railway more than £11m each year. Under the new policy, anyone found to have purposefully travelled without a valid ticket will be charged a minimum of £10, in many cases exceeding the price of the intended journey.

For shorter trips in particular, the minimum fare will represent a significant uplift. A return between Bishopbriggs and Glasgow Queen Street currently costs £3, meaning a passenger deemed to have intentionally avoided purchasing before boarding will instead face a £10 charge.

There will be no additional surcharge where the standard fare already exceeds £10, although customers must still buy before boarding to qualify for discounted products and railcard offers.

An education period will run from April 1 to July 2026, after which the £10 minimum fare will be formally implemented.

The operator said independent analysis of ticketless travel showed that in 74% of cases where passengers did not buy before boarding, the station ticket office had been open at the time of travel, while in 90% of cases a ticket vending machine had been operational but not used.

Exemptions to the policy will apply for customers who hold a National Entitlement Card, where a station ticket office is closed, where a station lacks a ticket office or ticket vending machine, or where a registered disability prevents use of a machine.

Passengers who can only pay by cash will be expected to obtain a 'promise to pay' notice from a ticket vending machine and complete their purchase with on-train staff. Staff will retain discretion to assess individual circumstances before issuing the minimum fare.

NR delivered during the festive season a £7M investment comprising over a mile's track renewal, seven points replacements, upgraded signalling and overhead lines and 450 yards of new drainage to Mossend, whose three depots last year handled over 80% of Scotland's railfreight, and interlockings and lineside renewals had been undertaken around Portobello..

Haymarket-Dalmeny closed for nine days from 17 January for electrification (a compound was to be installed on the site of a former linen factory at Sinclairtown) and buses replacing trains Dundee-Aberdeen-Inverurie on 31 January/1 February. Network Rail will undertake a £3.8M renewal of tracks at Aberdeen Station over three weekends into February, and has also received listed building consent to repair two footbridges at Inverkeithing. Four projects to repair and replace structures at Georgetown, the River Gryffe, Langbank and Greenock were combined during closure of the Inverclyde lines during 7-10 and 14-17 February.

The Department for Transport announced decisions on Access for All : Bellgrove will proceed to delivery, Falkirk Grahamston to detailed design, but Dumbarton Central and Inverurie would not be progressed at this stage. ScotRail said that 134 of its 360 stations were fully accessible, and 191 had partial stepfree access. Representations have led to NR providing a sloping end at Ardgay instead of steps so as to provide for a footpath crossing.

More passengers used Edinburgh Waverley than Glasgow Central in December, the third month of 2025 when this was so, and with the post-pandemic decline of commuting NR expected that this might become a permanent change. Ross Moran told the Unlocking Innovation rail conference in Glasgow that there was a wafer-thin margin between the two stations, and Waverley was on the cusp