

Article written for May 2008 edition of "Transport Times" on possible use of South Sub. for true trial of through running tram-train.

The Edinburgh South Suburban Railway (the "South Sub") runs in a loop of just over 12 miles connecting the city centre stations of Waverley and Haymarket with largely inner suburbs to the south and east, ranging from some of the wealthiest parts of the city to some of the poorest. A double track railway for almost its entire length, it also affords access to all other rail lines in the Edinburgh area.

Opened in 1884, the line carried both freight and local passenger trains - until the latter, serving various destinations both within and outwith the city, were withdrawn in 1962. The line is, however, still maintained to passenger standards and is used by the occasional scheduled Cross Country service to enable train crews to retain knowledge of this useful diversionary route. Indeed, the line was used several times in 2007 to allow GNER, Virgin and First ScotRail services to operate into Waverley during extensive works to enhance capacity at this key station in the Scottish rail network.

The line is not heavily used by freight trains and, as congestion on the roads of the city has steadily increased, so there has been an increasing clamour for this under-utilised asset to be allowed to play its part in helping to resolve some of the city's transport problems. Supported by all political parties, it's certainly a suggestion that finds widespread public support - unlike the city's congestion charging proposals rejected in a referendum in 2005.

In 1986 a study by Napier College's Transport Research Group estimated that, with five re-opened stations, 1.68m passengers would be carried annually. Atkins in 2004 suggested that patronage could be up to 3.896m with eight re-opened stations - and with a benefit cost ratio of up to 1.57.

Given such statistics, the City of Edinburgh Council requested an all-party meeting with the then Scottish Transport Minister in January 2007 to seek funding for the line's re-opening. Yet another study was commissioned - this time by Halcrow.

The Halcrow study immediately ruled out any service round the South Sub serving the city centre - due to lack of available train paths. Rail capacity should instead be used to expand services to destinations outwith the city. They did, however, note that a half-hourly heavy rail service to the expanding business area of Edinburgh Park in the west of the city would attract some 888,000 passengers per annum and that, served instead by quarter-hourly tram-trains and extended to a new interchange station with the tram line to Edinburgh airport at Gogar, such a service would see some 1.432m passengers annually. Peak trips per hour would be 710 and 1540 respectively. For comparison, the total number of passengers using Dundee railway station in 2005/6 was 1.5m while the number of passengers travelling between Edinburgh and Glasgow was 2.7m.

Halcrow, however, recommended that no action be taken to pursue either heavy or light rail options for the South Sub but that consideration be given instead to a bus service linking the popular suburb of Morningside/ Craiglockhart with the Edinburgh Park area - despite such a service attracting

only a maximum of 160,000 passengers per annum and with a subsidy requirement many times that of rail.

These recommendations were rejected by the council on 6 May. Instead, councillors reaffirmed their commitment to re-opening the South Sub with one option to be considered being the possibility of using tram-trains which could run through onto the city's tram lines.

This is an option which I have long very much supported. While train paths are clearly available to allow a heavy rail South Sub service to operate - Halcrow revealed a whole raft of planned services - these will always be limited in number and geographical extent. Through running by tram-trains offers greater scope to access both the city centre and the expanding areas to the west - not to mention use of other rail lines running to Edinburgh's rapidly developing waterfront where a town the size of Falkirk is being planned.

The DfT in England have recently announced a tram-train trial on the Penistone line in Yorkshire. But, as Jim Steer ably pointed out in last month's "Transport Times", "this looks more like an interesting attempt to reduce the cost of rural rail operations and make it more attractive at the same time" than a true trial of tram-trains running on both heavy and light rail tracks.

Here in Scotland, then, we have an ideal opportunity to conduct such a true trial of through running. The City Council is keen. The executive chairman of **tie** - the company charged with delivering Edinburgh's tram lines - is keen. Let's hope that the Scottish Government will also be keen to be at the cutting edge - albeit one the Germans perfected long ago!

Lawrence Marshall is chair of the Capital Rail Action Group. He served as an Edinburgh councillor from 1994 until 2007.

www.capitalrail.org.uk
www.reopenthesouthsub.org.uk