

Rail breathes new life into Alloa

Hundreds of people gathered at Alloa station on 15 May to welcome the reopening of the Stirling-Alloa-Kincardine railway line.

Scottish transport minister Stewart Stevenson joined local people as they climbed aboard a steam train to celebrate the culmination of eight years work.

Passenger trains now serve Alloa for the first time since it was closed in 1968, by Dr Beeching.

Almost immediately there was a overwhelming demand with long queues forming for tickets.

Within weeks, 8,000 people a week were using the station, "well above forecasts".

Mr Stevenson said: "This is one of the most important infrastructure projects Scotland has seen in decades, and the significance of this project extends beyond Stirling, Alloa and Kincardine. The whole of Scotland is set to benefit.

"This is a vital new link which will provide improved links to education and employment opportunities for communities across central Scotland, promote inward investment and increase sustainable economic growth to the area.

"It will also bring faster, more efficient freight routes for businesses, taking more lorries off our roads and on to rail."

Council leader Janet Cadenhead said: "The railway will breathe new life into Alloa and Clackmannanshire, encouraging businesses and jobs while providing our citizens with convenient, safe and fast public transport to Stirling, Glasgow and Edinburgh.

"I look forward to using the railway for many years to come.

"Clackmannanshire Council has campaigned for decades for the reopening of the rail link, and I would like to thank the many officers who have played a part in making this come about.

"The council's consistent involvement was key in drawing together the complex planning, building and legal issues in this massive project.

"Indeed, the first private rail bill ever approved by the Scottish Parliament in 2004 was lodged by the council."

Normal passenger services began on 19 May, thanks to the £85million project which reopened 13 miles of existing, disused and abandoned railway line between Stirling station and Longannet power station in Kincardine. The route will



DAY ONE: A train from Glasgow via Stirling arrives at Alloa station on 19 May 2008, the first day of public service on the reopened line

Picture: Ewan Crawford of www.railscot.com

allow freight trains to be diverted from the existing, longer route via the Forth Bridge, and thus release capacity for improved passenger services.

The new Alloa station allows direct hourly passenger services between Alloa, Stirling and Glasgow Queen Street and onward services from Stirling to Edinburgh.

Rosyth

The Alloa reopening has opened up a host of possible extensions and additions to the line, according to the *Wee County News*.

Local politicians are telling anyone who will listen that the next step must be to link passenger trains from Alloa to Edinburgh, via Rosyth.

"Most of the track is already in place," said Keith Brown, the MSP for Ochil. Mr Brown raised the point in the Scottish Parliament, hours after the inaugural train from Alloa.

"The benefits of extending the line to Dunfermline and opening it to passengers along the whole line would be huge," he said.

"There would be even more alternatives to car journeys in the area and

it might even make a direct service from Alloa to Edinburgh possible.

"A Rosyth service would even allow connections by sea with Europe." The idea is also supported by Clackmannanshire council as "a long-term aspiration".

When pushed for an answer in the Scottish Parliament, Mr Stevenson said: "Further extensions of the railway network take traffic off bridges throughout Scotland.

"I am very keen on railways. However, it's a subject to which we will return."

Martin O'Neill (now Lord O'Neill of Clackmannan) the MP who in 1979 instigated work which resulted in the Alloa reopening said: "Campaigning does work."

Bathgate

The next big railway project in Scotland is to reinstate the Airdrie-Bathgate link and the latest stage, the doubling of track from Bathgate to Edinburgh, should be complete in October. It should improve reliability on the busy Bathgate-Edinburgh commuter route.

Network Rail's David Simpson said: "New platforms at Livingston North and Uphall will also be completed by October."

The scheme requires new track and signalling at Newbridge Junction, on a section of line also used by the Edinburgh to Glasgow Queen Street and Edinburgh to Dunblane services.

Joe Ross, project manager for Transport Scotland, said: "The Airdrie-Bathgate project will introduce a

high quality public transport link for communities in North Lanarkshire and West Lothian. Linking them with the country's two biggest cities, Glasgow and Edinburgh, will open up new employment opportunities as well as encouraging more people to choose public transport over their cars."

Glasgow airport

By 2014, the £210million Glasgow Airport rail link which involves building a spur from Paisley and should open.

Railfuture however believes that the Glasgow Crossrail scheme should have been given the go-ahead at the same time as the airport link.

Railfuture's Ken Sutherland said that Crossrail would effectively link the two parts of the rail network. It would have improved the financial return of both schemes if both had gone ahead together.

Waverley

The SNP government in Scotland has been accused of building in a three-year delay to the £295million Borders rail reopening which would use part of the former Waverley line.

"Construction cannot now start until 2011," said Jeremy Purvis, Liberal Democrat MSP for Tweeddale, who initiated a Scottish Parliament debate on the Borders Railway in March.

The Waverley scheme is one of 22 schemes on Railfuture Scotland's wish list.

Franchise dispute The rail unions have objected to First Group being given a surprise three-year extension to its ScotRail franchise. Kevin Lindsay of Aslef – which wants Scottish rail operations returned to the public domain – said: "We are extremely suspicious of the timing of this announcement." RMT leader Bob Crow said the decision was "hasty and hypocritical" because Audit Scotland was on the verge of publishing a study into whether the franchise was providing value for money.