



Are we there yet?

Fixing Irish Rail

Rail Users Ireland Policy
January 2020



Introduction

Rail Users Ireland (RUI) is Ireland's official rail passenger body. Since its foundation in 2003, its members have campaigned on behalf of rail users in Ireland.

This document briefly outlines the state of Ireland's rail service, what we think is wrong and what we believe should be done. Focusing primarily on Irish Rail rather than Luas, we have selected ten of the most pressing issues that face rail passengers in Ireland and have matched them with simple, practical proposals for addressing them.

Despite the improved economic times, we are aware that any organisation making demands of the public purse is not likely to get a favourable reception. However, looking through the list of issues and policies we present below, it is clear that we are not looking for money to be thrown at the problem — indeed, that was the tactic deployed during the Celtic Tiger era with little effect. Instead, what this document is focused on are the simple things, based around the principle that that Irish Rail needs to put aside the petty bickering between government, management and unions, and re-orientate itself around the people that are supposed to be at the centre of it all: the passengers.

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Executive Summary

This document seeks to highlight and address common problems faced by users of rail services in Ireland each day. Despite having seen massive investment in new trains and upgraded infrastructure the railway run by Irish Rail does not embrace the customer in a manner consistent with a modern 21st Century rail service.

This policy document highlights 11 distinct areas where improvements and reforms can be achieved in the short and medium term without any increased subvention so that as the economy grows, rail can grow and attract more customers and play a key role in getting our economy moving again.

These areas cover core passenger issues such as journey times, security and accessibility. They also cover other issues that are crucial to fostering the role of a customer focused railway, consultation with everyday passengers and structural reform of our railways. Finally other issues key to passenger growth such as fares, car parking and future infrastructure are discussed. Rail Users Ireland calls on all stake holders; the Government and Opposition parties, the Department of Transport, National Transport Authority, CIE and the respective unions to embrace the proposals in this document and truly put the passenger at the heart of the railways in Ireland.

How things stand

Although the mantra about rail in Ireland for years has been always one of "decades of under investment", this is no longer the case. We still have the youngest and most reliable fleet in Europe. The latest signalling technology manages over 99% of all passenger kilometres travelled. The rails on the entire primary network have been re-laid, secondary routes have had extensive remediation work carried out and hundreds of level crossings have been closed, upgraded or automated. Irish Rail is, surprisingly, a fine engineering company, but all this progress is for nothing if the same kind of progress is not made on the service side of the business.

Everything on the infrastructure side points to a better, faster, more reliable service, which should cost less to run. Instead, we see fares increase well ahead of the rate of inflation and journey times that are getting longer rather than shorter. Although some aspects of the service have improved, passengers' expectations have also increased. Passengers simply do not accept that they should have to settle for third-rate rail services at a first-rate cost.

Our policies are based around a 'hierarchy of needs'. This is a list of priorities for the typical passenger. The list is not exhaustive or definitive but evolves over time. It begins with the obvious; a train, followed by a seat on that train. Next comes a reasonable frequency of trains, competitive journey times and on-time arrivals. Sufficient information on service changes and delays is something that is lacking across our rail network. After this on the hierarchy, comes reasonable fares, decent heating and lighting, catering and, in an ideal world, power sockets and even Wi-Fi.

What to do

To meet these needs we have put together a list of the 11 core issues, in no particular order, that face rail passengers in Ireland today.

1. Accessibility
2. Security
3. Journey Times
4. Car Parking
5. Fares
6. Consultation
7. Services outside 'normal' working hours
8. Governance (Service Standards + Public Service Obligation)
9. Structural Reform
10. Infrastructure
11. Staffing

The remainder of this document will briefly examine where things stand on each of these issues in turn as well as illustrating what policies RUI believes need to be pursued on each one.

1. Accessibility

Accessibility is not only about those in wheelchairs. It applies to anyone who is restricted in his or her ability to move. It includes, for example, people with buggies or large suitcases. All told, one in four rail users have some sort of accessibility issue.

The problem on the Irish Rail network is that there is a lax application of standards regarding accessibility. The vast majority of stations fail to meet the required standards, as does the DART and the regional commuter fleet. Even where there are lifts, these are frequently broken and seem to take an inordinate amount of time to repair. In addition, when services are cancelled, the substitute buses provided are typically not accessible.

All of this is well known to those who have to deal with accessibility issues every day of their lives. Poor communications from Irish Rail and previous bad experiences means that many of these people will now never consider using the train, and are thus disenfranchised from rail transport in Ireland.

1.1 RUI Accessibility Policy

- RUI supports full accessibility of all stations and trains without exception
- RUI seeks to have incorporated into Irish law specific standards and to impose severe penalties for failure to meet and sustain these standards
- The UK and European standards should provide the basis for these standards in Ireland.

2. Security

Security is a particular problem on the Irish Rail network. Anti-social behaviour remains one of the most unpleasant aspects of rail travel in Ireland. Abuse of alcohol and drugs is commonplace and incidents of begging, fare evasion, uncontrolled children, and vandalism all serve to make journeys more uncomfortable. Rather than address these issues, Irish Rail has exacerbated the situation by moving to unstaffed or part-time stations on many routes. Irish Rail has hired a security firm to address these issues but the response that RUI has had from passengers is that these security staff are ineffective and insufficient in number to make a difference.

Luas stops are also unstaffed but it is unusual for passengers to have to wait longer than 10 minutes for a tram so the unsettling effect of unsocial behaviour on the Luas system is lessened. Nevertheless, RUI remains concerned by the fact that Transdev continues to struggle with passenger security issues

2.1 RUI Security Policy proposals

- RUI support a dedicated Transport Police unit that is there to serve the public, rather than a rail operator.
- Seek a updating and tightening of byelaw regulations and greater enforcement of these regulations.
- Support a common sense zero tolerance policy to fare evasion.

3. Journey Times

Despite the massive investment in infrastructure mentioned in the introduction, journey times remain stubbornly high, often very similar to the times managed by steam trains 50 years ago. In fact, journey times on some routes have become longer.

- Journey times are the most obvious failure of the investment program
- Journeys on some routes have gotten slower
- However we must acknowledge average times have fallen significantly on many routes

The long held view in rail transport in Europe is that an end-to-end average of 120kph or better is required to be competitive with the car. However, even on a good day, 110kph is the best Irish Rail manages and that is limited to a single service, 5 days a week.

3.1 RUI Journey Times Policy proposals

Seek reduction in journey times across the network in order to remain competitive and provide better value for money. RUI believe that there should be a focus on

- Long standing speed restrictions
- Slow junctions – Cherryville, Howth Junction
- Capacity pinch points Bray – Greystones, Dublin-Malahide
- Seek the immediate targeted works to increase line speeds network wide
- Support plans for 200kph Belfast-Dublin & Dublin-Cork
- Evaluate extending restoring the second track between Maynooth and Mullingar
- Evaluate providing a second track in full or in part between Portarlinton and Athlone

4. Car Parking

Parking has always been a big issue for Irish Rail passengers. Where they exist in the first place, car parks are typically small, with bad access. While these are legacy issues resulting from the fact that cars didn't exist when the stations were constructed, there is no excuse for the fact that most stations are now badly laid out, with bad lighting, no CCTV, and few or no markings to help passengers use the space efficiently.

It is no wonder that passengers reacted with disbelief in September 2008 when Irish Rail announced that it was introducing a charge for this poor service, backed up by draconian clamping policies for those who overstayed or had no change to pay. The new pay parking machines and associated signage were the first investment that many stations had seen in years. Depressingly, many passengers decided this was the last straw.

Despite the introduction of pay parking, there has been no corresponding introduction of security into car parks, which remain unstaffed – this is a key issue for passengers. Equally, many stations are remote from the towns they notionally serve, if a charge is introduced, surely alternative options, like local shuttle buses should be provided.

4.1 RUI Car Parking Policy proposals

- Car parks at train stations should be dedicated for the sole use of rail passengers.
 - Penal rates should be charged for non rail users
- We acknowledge that it is infeasible to provide ever bigger car parks
 - There is a need for a greater integration with local bus services
- Where a car park is charged for, the following must be in place
 - A viable alternative to driving
 - E.g. a local feeder bus service
 - Parking + rail tickets in line with NTA guidelines
 - Security

5. Fares

Although cheaper fares would be welcomed by all passengers, RUI believe that, in general, passengers are comfortable with paying a reasonable fare once they feel that they are being treated with respect and getting value for money. For this to happen there should be a sense that problems that arise are addressed and services are seen to improve.

Apart from the general level of fares, there are specific cases where the fare structure is inconsistent and confusing. This is particularly the case with the Dublin fare zones, which are strangely distorted and no longer fit for purpose. Within Dublin there is little relationship between distance travelled and fare paid.

In addition, many passengers dislike the fact that single and return fares on most Intercity routes are set at almost or exactly the same price, making a single journey seem especially bad value.

While annual commuter tickets are available, the availability is inconsistent. For passengers to get tax and PRSI relief on their tickets, their employer must agree to provide the tickets on a salary sacrifice basis, rather than the pay and claim process that applies on other tax reliefs like those applicable to bin charges and medical expenses. Additionally, Transdev which previously opted to provide parking facilities in the annual ticket scheme no longer provides this option which is a step backwards.

Overall, the fare structure is overly complex and it regularly happens that different parts of Irish Rail quote different fares for the same journey. It must be noted Irish Rail still cannot provide a fare quote between any two randomly chosen stations online.

5.1 RUI Fares Policy proposals

RUI supports a complete revamp of the fare structure. This should be revenue neutral as far as possible, but would give greater transparency and fairness to the system, leading to a rise in confidence among the travelling public that they are getting value for money.

- All fares to be a fixed percentage of a standard monthly return
- Eliminate the current distance zone system and adopt a fairer per km fare model
- Create a multi zone commuter fare structure in Dublin and Cork
- Introduce commuter zones Limerick & Galway
- Allow all tax payers to avail of the TaxSaver scheme

6. Consultation

Many of the small annoying problems that passengers face day-in day-out are because of a failure to consult with passengers. Decisions are taken from a height and it is only when these decisions are put into operation that the unnecessary disruption and inconvenience that they cause to passenger's lives become apparent.

A particular problem is that of timetable planning. Currently Irish Rail timetable changes are presented as fact. With few exceptions, customers must adopt to what Irish Rail presents to them. This is in stark contrast to the UK rail industry where passenger focus groups are consulted well in advance. This gives the rail operator a chance to react to any issues in the timetable that are not obvious to the higher echelons that set the timetable.

Another issue, though not obvious, is passenger feedback on new rolling stock. The last two major purchases of rolling stock, while welcome, have not had any input from the ultimate end-users. A raft of comfort and accessibility issues could have been highlighted with a simple interaction between the Irish Rail and passengers. This is common practice in other transport jurisdictions where full-scale mock-ups are provided early to provide vital feedback.

6.1 RUI Consultation Policy proposals

- Consultation with passengers to become the norm
 - 12 weeks advance notice of timetable changes to enable passengers to give their feedback on proposed changes.
 - Passenger consultation on new equipment.
- Appointment of passenger representative within Irish Rail

7. Services outside ‘normal’ working hours

Looking at the Irish Rail timetable it would seem as if Irish people only work the typical 9 to 5, Monday to Friday week. This is clearly not the case, and modern work and leisure lifestyles should be reflected in the service Irish Rail provide. For instance, Sunday services ignore completely the needs of commuters and the lifestyle needed in a 24/7 economy. Indeed, it is impossible to avail of public transport in Dublin on a Sunday morning to make the first intercity departures from Dublin Heuston. Similarly, it is impossible to catch a train to the outer reaches of the Dublin commuter belt after 7pm, 7 days a week. With Bus Éireann operating successful all-night services all along the east coast, it's clear that the demand is there.

The services should meet the demands of the 21st century 24/7 work and leisure lifestyle. The following are some highlights, or perhaps lowlights:

- There are no services after 11:30pm in the Greater Dublin Region
- Sunday services do not exist on the Limerick – Waterford line
- There is typically a reduced Sunday service on Bank Holiday weekends
- Christmas services, including services on the three normal working days between Christmas and the end of the year, are seemingly random, and communication of Christmas timetables is haphazard
- The Good Friday Syndrome — a Saturday service, or less, is provided on a normal weekday

Luas has shown the way in this area and has reaped the rewards. Indeed the big success of Luas, in terms of passenger numbers, is the amount of off-peak passengers who use the service. This shows that if a decent service is provided, the passengers will follow.

7.1 RUI Services outside ‘normal’ working hours policy proposals

- Services to meet 21st century 24-7 work and leisure lifestyles
- Services 7 days a week
- Clockface timetabling* for best integration
- Support increased service levels to meet a basic target of at least one train per 2 hours on **all** regional and intercity routes

*Clockface timetabling is where trains run at the same number of minutes past the hour. For example, departures at 9:05, 10:05, 11:05.

8. Governance

The current level of subvention Irish Rail receives for the provision of public transport services is in the region of 40%. Taxpayers are paying for almost half of Irish Rail's expenditure. While this percentage of subvention is low by European standards, it is nonetheless provided to fulfil a vital *public* function, to enable the wider public to travel in comfort and convenience on Irish Rail. However, there is a huge disconnect between the subvention given as a *Public Service Obligation* (PSO) and the service actually provided by Irish Rail to the public.

The standards to which Irish Rail does operate are very lax in comparison to the rest of Europe — a train arriving 10 minutes after its scheduled arrival time is considered on time, despite 5 minutes being the standard adopted by the International Union of Railways (UIC) of whom Irish Rail are members.

Despite the introduction of a formal PSO contract with the creation of the NTA, RUI has seen no evidence of the NTA auditing Irish Rail's quarterly performance.

Obviously, RUI finds this situation unacceptable. There is any number of areas in which Irish Rail fails to live up to its Public Service Obligation as clearly illustrated elsewhere in this document.

8.1 RUI Governance Policy proposals

A complete overhaul of the current light touch regulation of the NTA to ensure severe consequences for failures to meet realistic standards based on European norms

- Punctuality targets in line with European 5 minute standard for all services
- 94% of suburban and regional services to arrive within 5 minutes
- 90% of intercity services to arrive within 5 minutes
- 99.5% of services to operate as planned¹
- 8 weeks notice of timetable changes for any reason
- Discounts and refunds for season ticket holders when targets are not achieved

¹ Any deviation from the published timetable in terms of stations served to be considered a cancellation

9. Structural Reform

The issue of structural reform is something that is needed to transform the provision of public transport in Ireland. CIE is seen a failed brand and is a byword for a broken service in the public conscious. CIE have not carried a passenger since 1987, and though all three public transport companies are federated under CIE, public transport provision has fragmented rather than integrated in the interim period. Dublin and its suburbs have suffered greatly from this as the bus competes with the train for passengers and the *overall* services suffer. An example of this is the South Dublin DART corridor. Eight different bus routes also serve a well-serviced rail line. This was allowed to develop needlessly by higher CIE management.

With specific regard to Irish Rail, CIE retains all land rights and incomes from Irish Rail properties. Thus, monies earned from Irish Rail properties such as car parking charges and the old rail yards in Spencer Dock, Connolly, Cork and Pearse are not guaranteed to be invested where they logically should be: in the rail system. The monies that are paid to CIE property should be retained and invested in the railway.

9.1 RUI Structural Reform Policy proposals

- Seek abolition of CIE
 - Divide property assets up according to users
 - Allocate historical debt to its owners
- Irish Rail to operate on a commercial basis like the RPA
 - Board to have passenger representation
 - Public Members' concept used by Network Rail UK
- Split into two distinct companies - Operations vs. Infrastructure, not the current split which exists solely on paper
- Open market to competition under EU open access regulations

10. Infrastructure

As a passenger body, RUI is primarily concerned with existing rail passengers. The history of rail transport in Ireland is littered with failed visions and grand schemes that came to nothing and we do not wish to add to that shameful legacy. In principal, we support developments that make passenger's lives easier and encourage more people to take the train. This includes improved integration between all modes of public transport. In addition, we hope that priority is given to those areas where the greatest benefit can be delivered to the largest number of passengers.

We do not support infrastructure development where we feel that this is motivated more by political expediency rather than sensible investment that is likely to attract large numbers of passengers. Occasionally, therefore, we have concluded that certain infrastructure developments are not beneficial and should not be given precedence when there is greater need elsewhere. Although we continue to oppose the development of the Western Rail Corridor between Athenry and Sligo as a prime example of this, we endeavour to represent the passengers who decide to use the Ennis –Athenry line.

On the other hand, RUI has been steadfast in its support of the DART Underground project and the new DART services that will accompany it, dramatically transforming the nature of public transport in the GDA. We believe that this is the single most important piece of infrastructure investments in the history of rail in this country. However, we have been disappointed with the poor efforts by Irish Rail to promote this project, both in the policy community and the public at large, which has resulted in a widespread lack of understanding of the benefits this development would bring.

10.1 RUI Infrastructure Policy proposals

- Seek highest level of integration with between all public transport modes
- Acknowledge our primary concern is that of the existing rail passenger
- Sensible investment prioritised in terms of the benefit it will provide in terms of passenger usage
- DART Underground to be delivered

11. Staffing

One of the most frequent complaints from passengers is the absence of a member of staff when things go wrong. It is imperative that a passenger comes face to face with an employee at least once during their journey. The railways only source of revenue is the passenger and therefore steps must be taken to ensure a passenger has a reasonable opportunity to purchase a ticket either before or during travel.

Irish Rail's continuous push to eliminate both on-train staff and station staff leaves the passenger in the lurch. There is often no one to provide assistance, no one to issue tickets the ticket machines don't understand, no one to assist mobility-impaired passengers, and no one to provide a security presence.

This destaffing heavily contrasts with industry best practice which has focused providing a train manager on all long distance services to attend to the needs of passengers onboard, issuing and checking of tickets. This role combines the ticket checker and guard roles, reducing costs yet providing a better passenger service.

Elsewhere there has been a return to the traditional station master role, of one member of staff on duty at the station, helping passengers, providing a security presence to reduce both fare evasion and vandalism, and, when required, to issue tickets.

11.1 RUI Staffing Policy Proposals

- A passenger must come face to face with a member of staff at least once during their journey
- For all intercity and regional services a 'train manager' concept should be adopted which combines the roles of train host, guard and ticket checker
- On high-density suburban routes and key intercity stations, stations should be staffed from the first train till the departure of the last train

Conclusion

The start of the 21st century delivered an amazing amount of investment directed towards Irish Rail, with track renewed, rolling stock replaced and old lines re-opened. Throughout this time, Irish Rail had the greatest growth of rail passengers in all of Europe.

Whilst the huge investment was a large part of this reason, it was not the sole reason. The economic boom resulted in many people choosing to take the train for their daily needs, often with demand exceeding supply. The daily frustrations of rail users have never been fully ameliorated despite the record investment. We believe therefore that to attract more customers and maintain the growth in rail users as the economy returns to growth, it is essential that the passenger is embraced. This means that passengers can engage and consult with rail operators to enable the railway to evolve with passenger needs.

We believe that by implementing the proposals outlined in this document, we can create a flexible and dynamic railway that all citizens of Ireland can be part of.