



REOPENING BLACKFORD STATION OUTLINE BUSINESS CASE

1st March 2011

Geographic Context

Blackford is located adjacent to the A9 between Stirling and Perth, bypassed from the A9 by the B8081 that runs through the village, past the location of the proposed station, rejoining the A9 to the north. The only existing rail station between Dunblane and Perth is at Gleneagles, 3 miles from Blackford along the A9. Annex A contains a location map highlighting the geographical context of the station locations.

Background

Atkins Report

In May 2004, Atkins were appointed by Perth & Kinross Council, Scottish Enterprise Tayside, Fife Council, Highland Spring and the Highland Rail Partnership to evaluate feasibility of developing new rail stations at Blackford, Greenloaning, Bridge of Earn and Newburgh. The study was undertaken using Scottish Transport Appraisal Guidance (Part 1) methodology.

Key findings in relation to Blackford :

- *Reopening Blackford Station would serve a larger local catchment area than Gleneagles*
- *A new station at Blackford would also better serve rail users who currently drive to Dunblane and would reduce pressure on parking*
- *Given poor access arrangement at Gleneagles, and the potential to capture additional demand, there would be merit in opening a station at Blackford*
- *However, it is unlikely that a case could be made to reopen Blackford if Gleneagles station was retained.*
- *The introduction of a new local rail service between Dunblane and Perth appears to be operationally feasible.*
- *Capital cost of a new station at Blackford estimated to be c.£2m.*

TACTRAN TERS Study

TACTRAN and its partners have, since 2002, undertaken various studies to investigate the potential for rail improvements along the Arbroath-Dundee-Perth-Glasgow Corridor. Proposals for the rail-based aspirations were incorporated in the TACTRAN Regional Transport Strategy (RTS) approved by Scottish Ministers in June 2008.

This led directly to an extended Tay Estuary Rail Study (TERS) undertaken by Steer Davies Gleave that was formally approved by TACTRAN in June 2009.

This work shortlisted an enhanced Gleneagles station, reopening Blackford station and a new station at Dundee West as the 3 strongest performing options. Following further analysis, the study concluded that *“following introduction of an hourly ScotRail service at Gleneagles in the short term, efforts to focus on realising the opportunities to improve access and facilities for an enhanced Gleneagles Station will be better served than on providing a new station at Blackford, having regard to the Ryder Cup at Gleneagles in 2014.”*

COBRA and its widespread network of supporters fundamentally disagree with this conclusion and strongly argue that it is founded on a relatively superficial analysis of the evidence and is not substantiated by the 2004 study or by the subsequent, detailed independent business case published in April 2010.

AECOM Business Case Report

Following a successful application to the Climate Challenge Fund, COBRA commissioned AECOM, transport consultants to undertake an independent study into the business case and market demand for reopening Blackford station. The work involved direct stakeholder consultation, a resident's survey and policy review and led to a final report in April 2010.

This report highlighted that the pattern of rail use is greater and much more complex than captured in the TERS study. In particular, there are c.100,000 rail journeys made through station at Dunblane, Bridge of Allan, Gleneagles and Perth that have their origins in the wider Strathallan and Strathearn catchment.

The analysis strongly suggests that reopening Blackford Station in preference to enhancing Gleneagles would yield c.35% more rail journeys, i.e. a total of c. 88,400 rail journeys in the catchment of which c.68,013 would be from Blackford compared to c.45,543 at an enhanced Gleneagles. These figures contrast with the overall estimate of 40,000 journeys in the TERS Study.

An options appraisal of Blackford based on the STAG guidance was also undertaken covering criteria such as Performance Against Planning Objectives, implementability on grounds such as technical, operational, affordability, environment, safety, economy, accessibility and social inclusion and integration. This led to the conclusion that Blackford is a "superior option across the majority of appraisal criteria". Further, the report concluded that it was surprising that "Blackford Rail Station has been dismissed by the TERS report" and that "in order to meet the challenges of the future, particularly a locally accessible and attractive sustainable transport network, it is necessary to realise the opportunities that can be achieved by a reopened Blackford Rail Station."

The Business Case in Brief

There is widespread recognition of the need for improvements in rail services in the Strathallan and Strathearn area. Reopening Blackford Station presents the strongest business case as described below.

- **Catchment Demand**

As outlined above, the potential for increased rail journeys afforded by reopening Blackford Station equates to c.68,000 rail journeys per annum. This is still likely to be an underestimate as the Perth & Kinross area is forecast to experience a highly significant population growth of up to 26.9% between 2008 and 2033. Within the station catchment area, c.1,562 residential units are allocated, equating to c.2,300 additional population between 2008 and 2017.

The resident's survey undertaken by AECOM identified strong support for a new station at Blackford and it is particularly notable that 64% of current non train users indicated a preference to use a reopened Blackford Station.

COBRA considers these developments as having a significant material influence on passenger demand for a station at Blackford, and potentially for developer contributions towards the station costs.

Although the station catchments for Blackford and an enhanced Gleneagles are very similar, Blackford is strongly differentiated by its close links to the population centres as outlined below. In turn, this will lead to a significantly greater realisation of the projected catchment demand at Blackford.

- Capital Cost

It is considered that a realistic cost estimate for a “fit for purpose” station at Blackford would be in the region of c.£3m-£3.5m and that the TERS Study estimate of c.£4.5m was overly generous (ref. AECOM). COBRA emphasises that the station design should not be overspecified, should be suited to meet business requirements and particular attention should be paid to the use of modular platform builds and reducing station platform length to the minimum necessary. COBRA has also compiled information from other similar station sites across the UK.

It is considered that the TERS Study costs for enhancing Gleneagles of c.£3.7m have underestimated the costs and difficulties of land acquisition, the potential risks associated with the unknown structural state of existing facilities, the cost of DDA compliance measures, the engineering solution for the access road and the cost of utility diversions. Further, Access for All funding has been significantly reduced since the TERS Study reported, making the work on DDA compliance at Gleneagles potentially now a much longer term option. Taken together it is likely that the costs associated with Gleneagles will easily exceed £4m.

- Economic Performance

The estimated revenue costs for Blackford or an enhanced Gleneagles is c.£60k per annum. Benefit to cost ratios for both stations are broadly comparable. However, taking into account the higher demand figures for Blackford, the uplift in anticipated rail use at Blackford, the lower projected capital costs at Blackford and the increased allowance for capital costs at Gleneagles then it can be readily concluded that the economic appraisal for Blackford is much more favourable than Gleneagles.

Blackford also ranks higher when considering the wider economic benefits given its coherent linkage to economic development in the area with direct access to the main businesses in the area and the adjacent link to the new G West golfing complex.

- Technical Feasibility

Physical construction of a reopened station at Blackford is relatively straightforward and carries a low risk. Platform and sidings infrastructure still exist at the site. There are no land ownership issues (all land is still owned by Network Rail), no access issues as the site is adjacent to the main road through the village and there is no requirement for complex solutions to DDA compliance as the site is on level ground throughout.

There are significant technical considerations in enhancing Gleneagles. The land required for alternative access is privately owned and would need to be compulsorily purchased – a lengthy, complex and costly process underestimated in the TERS study. Failure to achieve the new access road from the A823 means that (a) car entry to Gleneagles from Auchterarder would still be via the dangerous limited access gap on the A9 and (b) there would be no integrated bus service as local bus companies have desisted from operating services to the station on the advice of Police due to the poor sightlines onto the A9. Further, Gleneagles station buildings are a heritage feature and will require detailed structural assessment to determine the feasibility of installing disabled lifts and related facilities for DDA compliance. Work at Gleneagles would also include the need to improve the adverse camber of the track.

- Accessibility and Social Inclusion

The station is located within the boundary of the village and is directly accessible to people considering walking, cycling or using other public transport modes. Docherty's Midland Coaches, the local bus operator, support the proposals to reopen Blackford and have already made a commitment to adjust service timings to integrate with rail services. Encouraging this use of public transport at Blackford will present new opportunities to the young, old and non-car owners and promote greater long term social inclusion in the community. Blackford rail station also provides direct economic links to key employment sites at Highland Spring, Eaglesgate, G-West and Tullibardine Distillery.

Gleneagles station is remote, secluded and disconnected from all the business and residential communities in the area. There are no public transport links to Gleneagles as a result of the particular dangers associated with the station junction on the A9. Similarly, access on foot or by cycle involve a lengthy, unlit round trip via the Loaninghead junction or a very risky traverse of the A9. The station is located on the wrong side of the A9, vehicular access is restricted as there are no deceleration or acceleration lanes and visibility when emerging from the station access is constrained by a bend in the A9 and vegetation. Whilst Gleneagles is currently the closest station to the main centres of population, the disadvantages of the station location are such that significantly more rail patronage in the area goes to Dunblane, Bridge of Allan or Perth in preference.

- Safety and Security

The Blackford station site is within the village, on a well lit main road and the station site is overlooked by a permanently manned signal box. As a result, the station performs very strongly in relation to real and perceived levels of personal security on the rail network.

Gleneagles station is in a very isolated location- over a mile from the nearest town and some 500 metres from the A9. The station is sparsely populated and represents a strongly perceived safety and security threat for rail passengers.

- Environment

With a significant potential uplift on rail use associated with reopening Blackford Station compared to Gleneagles (c.25,000 journeys per annum) then there is a significantly greater potential environmental benefit for Blackford Station. Reopening the station would create the opportunity for a multi-modal transport hub and promote low carbon access to the station. Public transport, walking and cycling access available to every residence in Blackford, Auchterarder and neighbouring

communities creating significant potential for a low carbon access estimated to be c.6,600 people at present.

Conversely, Gleneagles station suffers from significant disadvantages that severely restrict the potential for low carbon access. Reaching Gleneagles by public transport is not possible and cycling or walking access involves a lengthy detour or a dangerous travers of the A9. Low carbon access for Gleneagles is close to zero.

- Service Operation

There are no significant rail timetabling reasons to prevent services stopping at Blackford instead of Gleneagles. If trains no longer stopped at Gleneagles, reopening Blackford would have a neutral effect on existing timetables. If Gleneagles remained open, the additional stop at Blackford would have a marginal effect on timetabling. It should be noted that a recent survey of rail users ranked reliability and punctuality many times more important than reducing overall journey times by a matter of a few minutes.

Gleneagles currently has the advantage of long platforms for intercity and sleeper services. Suitable alternative arrangements would have to be made at Blackford and this could include using a Selective Door Opening (SDO) system where train managers have been able open train doors that are at the platform, but leave those doors that are off the platform, locked for safety.

- Commissioning Timescale

As a result of the above, a reopened station at Blackford could easily be achieved within 24 months, leading to a consequent early return on investment and realisation of the widespread social, economic and environmental benefits.

With the complexity of land ownership issues and the potential structural issues associated with DDA compliance of the existing facilities, the potential lead time for enhancing Gleneagles could easily be up to 5 years or more.

2014 Ryder Cup

The business case to reopen Blackford Station is compelling. A further significant opportunity is presented by the 2014 Ryder Cup. International events such as this bring the eyes of the world to Scotland and create an iconic opportunity to generate a lasting impact and a long-term legacy. There will be an anticipated influx of c 250,000 visitors, professionals, support staff and exhibitors. A failure to make adequate transport provision would lead to serious reputational damage and loss of credibility for Scottish tourism in general .

It will be essential to optimise the use of local rail transport to cope with the large influx of visitors. Maintaining the status quo with existing rail services in the area is not an option. One of the key lessons learned at recent Ryder Cup events has been that transport planning should be undertaken at a very early stage and if not addressed properly will have a direct impact on the economic value of hosting the event. We are therefore surprised to note that work on transport planning for the event seems to be at such an early stage and that no programme of works or provisional costings have been derived.

Given that investment in the transport infrastructure will be essential to the success of the 2014 Ryder Cup COBRA would strongly argue that, from a rail perspective, the best use of public funds at this time is to direct early investment towards Blackford station reopening and in doing so, also achieving completion of a crucial rail intervention in this area.

Conclusion

Recognising that there is a clear case for improving access to rail services in the Strathearn and Strathallan areas, the business case then focuses on the most appropriate location to make that investment. In the current economic climate and with a continued squeeze on public expenditure, we strongly contend that reopening Blackford Station will provide the optimal return on investment in the short, medium and long term.

We disagree that the current hierarchy for investment should be targeted on current stations and services in precedence to new or reopened stations. Most of the existing rail stations and infrastructure date back to the late 19th and early 20th century – since then, population growth, wider transport infrastructure developments, changing social and environmental demands mean that investing in the past may no longer be relevant, or financially prudent, to meet current and future rail demands.

We would strongly urge the Transport Minister to reconsider this policy position, not least in time for the 2014-2019 investment period. In the current economic climate and with the anticipated constraints on government spending for the foreseeable future, the focus should be on the comparative business cases associated with the options.

The business case for Blackford Station re-opening clearly stands up with or without the 2014 Ryder Cup. However, if a holistic view is taken, then it is logical that investing in Blackford now will provide dual benefits to the local communities as well as to the global event and achieve significant economies of scale. It would be irresponsible of government if late recognition of the need for rail investment as part of the event's transport plan ended up with it being automatically directed to Gleneagles simply because the objective and thorough review of the Blackford business case had not been made.

COBRA asserts that reopening Blackford station presents real value for money and would be a comparatively inexpensive investment that will provide a quicker return than an enhanced Gleneagles and will satisfy a wider range of social, environmental and economic benefits.

Further Information

More information about COBRA can be found at www.cobra-blackford.org.uk. To contact COBRA, please email info@cobra-blackford.org.uk.

Appendix A - LOCATION OF BLACKFORD AND GLENEAGLES STATIONS

