

Strathspey Railway – Update – 10 December 2023

Joint Statement from

Colin Stirling, Acting Chairman, Strathspey Railway Company Limited
Ian Stanworth, Chairman, Strathspey Railway Association

All those with an interest in the Strathspey Railway, whether members of the SRC, SRA, Volunteers or Employees, will know that the past few months have been amongst the most difficult in the Railway's history. A summary of the problems facing the Railway are explained in the most recent issue of the Strathspey Express which, if you haven't read, can be found at www.strathspeyrailwayassociation.co.uk.

Rather than dwell on past problems, the Boards of the SRC and SRA have come together to drive changes first envisaged at a joint meeting held on 9 September. This is being done through a new group called the Way Forward Group (WFG) made up of representatives from the Boards of the SRC, SRA, the Strathspey Railway Charitable Trust and other stakeholders in the Railway including employees and those who signed the Petition for change. In addition, a more focused group, the Joint Boards' Group (JBG) has been set up comprising members from the three Boards. At the request of the SRA and SRC Directors, both these Groups are being led by John Yule. John is widely known and respected across the Railway; currently a volunteer driver, he is a former SRC Board Member and Chairman of the SRCT and was one of those who signed the Petition for change.

Personal Statement from

John Yule, Chairman of the Way Forward Group and the Joint Boards' Group

We are faced with a very difficult and precarious situation, but we are urgently trying to find our way through this to put our Railway back on track and that's what all of us want to see. All railways are having their challenges, the Funicular is currently closed - again. We are still running. Yes, we are!

There are green shoots, that the two Group forums outlined above have helped to nurture:

- Six days of festive services are planned this month. Sure, a somewhat reduced service compared to previous years, but it's still vital cash flow and guess what? It may well be pretty close to a sell-out! Indeed, as I write this, we have just completed the first two days successfully with nearly full trains.
- Other heritage railways are struggling to return to pre-Covid passenger levels, but that has not been a problem for the SR. Passenger numbers in 2024 are uncertain for obvious reasons, but already we have a number of Group booking requests. Of course, we need qualified footplate crews and an Ops committee has been formed to understand who is available in 2024 and implement a planned programme of Assessments, starting this weekend.
- An initial 4-day running week 2024 Timetable has been produced, which recognises an element of uncertainty here, but will allow group bookings to be taken and can be expanded as the staffing and demand picture clears.

- We are about to advertise for the full-time position of a General Manager, responsible for the day-to-day management of the railway and to this end an advert will shortly appear in various publications and websites, including our own. This is culturally, a major step forward, not only to improve overall management and control, but also to help the SRC Board to transition to the slimmer, more strategically focused model envisioned by the joint SRC/SRA improvement plan. We also believe that the long-term cost and other benefits this role will bring to the Railway, will outweigh the salary costs involved.
- A 'Survive to Thrive' funding appeal will shortly be launched by the SRA to increase their funding potential and support to the SRC- look out for that.

Challenges of course remain:

- Working together across the SR organisation has always had its difficulties, but the two Group forums above are showing a high level of cooperation, commitment and enthusiasm across boards and departments, and if we can build on this we will move forward and grow.
- The SRC board have as a whole, taken an unfair battering recently and the ramifications continue to play out in ongoing resignations. To their credit, they continue to run the railway and work on a number of difficult legacy issues, including the ORR Improvement Notice, insurance claims, SEPA concerns and anonymous complaints to the ORR. The Board nevertheless needs replenishing on an interim basis, to spread the current burden, until we transition to the new board structure.
- Cash Flow! As soon as appropriate, we will provide more clarity on this and release an updated financial forecast. We also intend to implement a tighter degree of process driven and accountable cost control, based on departmental budgets, together with better and regular P&L forecasting, particularly for Directors and Department Heads. However, without budgets initially generated by the departments, the whole process is difficult.

I hope this brief message helps your understanding of where we are. Whilst in this role, I will endeavour to update on a regular basis.

Various support groups and committees are still required to drive us forward and if you can help the Railway in any way, please let Duncan Gilmour or your usual contact know, even if simply to say, you are available next season.

All the best, John

DUNCAN GILMOUR

Company Secretary

STRATHSPEY RAILWAY COMPANY LIMITED

