

Monday 6th July, 2026

Sail & Rail: Unlocking a low-carbon alternative on Europe's busiest air corridor

Addressed to the Secretary of State for Transport (UK) and the Minister for Transport and Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment (Ireland), and to the relevant government departments responsible for aviation, climate, and transport policy in both nations.

Dear Secretary of State and Ministers,

We write to you as a coalition of sixteen environmental, transport and socioeconomic justice organisations calling on the governments of the United Kingdom and Ireland to act together on one of the most scalable and immediately available decarbonisation tools at your shared disposal: travel by train and ferry. Low awareness of the combined “Sail & Rail” ticket¹ and poor coordination between train and ferry timetables, are concurrently suppressing demand for low-carbon travel and sustaining demand for highly polluting short-haul flights on one of Europe's busiest air corridors. The solutions are straightforward, but they require coordination and political will.

Why this matters now

Both the UK and Ireland have made legally binding net-zero commitments, yet both are falling significantly short of their interim targets. The UK's Climate Change Committee has found that only a third of the emissions reductions required to achieve the 2030 target is covered by credible plans². Ireland entirely omits emissions from international aviation from its reduction targets (flights between Ireland and the UK are international flights).

Aviation is a major and growing part of both countries' emissions problem. In Ireland, aviation accounted for 6% of total national emissions, 3.3 million tonnes of CO₂, in 2024 alone, at almost double the European average for air travel per capita³. In the UK, the Climate Change Committee projects aviation's share of total greenhouse gas emissions will rise from 7% in 2022 to as much as 16% by 2035 (international aviation emissions will be formally included in carbon budgets from 2033)^{4,5}.

¹ “Sail & Rail” tickets are combined tickets that include both the rail and the ferry between Ireland & the UK. They are sold at standard price bands depending on the distance traveled which makes the travel approximately four times cheaper, depending on when booked.

² Climate Change Committee, Progress in Reducing Emissions: 2024 Report to Parliament, July 2024. Available at: www.theccc.org.uk/publication/progress-in-reducing-emissions-2024-report-to-parliament

³ Environmental Protection Agency, Final Greenhouse Gas Emissions 1990–2024, March 2026. Available at: www.epa.ie/publications/monitoring--assessment/climate-change/air-emissions/EPA-Final-GHG-Emissions-Report-1990-2024.pdf

⁴ House of Commons Library, Aviation and Climate Change, CBP-8826, citing Climate Change Committee projections. Available at: commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-8826

⁵ Climate Change Committee, The Sixth Carbon Budget: Aviation, December 2020. Available at: www.theccc.org.uk/publication/sixth-carbon-budget

At the centre of this challenge is the Dublin–London route which was the busiest city pair in Europe for the third year running in 2024, averaging 91 daily flights⁶. A lower-carbon alternative already exists, yet it remains invisible to most travellers.

The case for Sail & Rail

A return flight between London and Dublin produces approximately 174.8 kg CO₂⁷. Sail & Rail produces at least 73% fewer emissions⁸, and this does not account for the non-CO₂ warming effects of aviation such as contrail formation, which could effectively double the climate impact of each flight. As the energy grid decarbonises and ferries become increasingly electrified, the carbon advantage of Sail & Rail will only grow.

The case is not only environmental. Combined train and ferry journeys are frequently more economical than flying once hidden flight costs, baggage fees, airport transfers, security queues, are factored in. They also offer a more comfortable, spacious experience, particularly for families and those travelling with luggage or pets.

Three barriers that both governments can remove

Despite the significant emissions savings and cost advantages that Sail & Rail can offer, several barriers are currently preventing passengers from choosing it. We have identified three issues that both governments should prioritise addressing.

1. Low awareness of the combined ticket

Research gathered by our organisations reveals a consistent finding: the majority of people who regularly travel between the UK and Ireland have never heard of the Sail & Rail ticket. Those who discovered it often did so by chance. Operators and governments must treat Sail & Rail as a product worth promoting, not a niche alternative.

2. Poor timetable coordination and unreliable booking platforms

Passengers report persistent frustration at the misalignment between train arrivals and ferry departures. Research by Opportunity Green found that major booking platforms, including Trainline, in some cases present passengers with impossible connections – combinations of train and ferry times that cannot physically be made. For some regular travellers, the booking experience has become so frustrating that they've resorted to calling operators directly to piece together a workable journey. This is a clear sign of a broken system that quietly pushes people towards buying a flight instead.

6 EUROCONTROL, Data Snapshot #49: Busiest City Pairs 2024, February 2025. Available at: www.eurocontrol.int/publication/eurocontrol-data-snapshot-49-busiest-city-pairs-2024

7 Calculated using the ICAO Carbon Emissions Calculator, the international standard methodology for flight emissions. Available at: icec.icao.int

8 Seat61.com, CO₂ Emissions: Train & Ferry versus Plane, www.seat61.com/CO2flights.htm. Note: emissions figures vary by calculator and methodology; this figure does not account for the non-CO₂ warming effects of aviation, which could effectively double the climate impact of each flight.

This problem is not unique to Sail & Rail: the EU's Passenger Package (May 2026) recognises the same fragmentation across European rail⁹ and proposes that major booking platforms be required to display all available connections and fares. The UK will not automatically benefit from these EU reforms and should take its own steps to require booking accuracy on this corridor.

3. Unclear passenger rights for combined journeys

When something goes wrong on a Sail & Rail journey, a delayed train causing a missed ferry, for example, many passengers do not know who bears responsibility or what recourse they have. No clear framework exists to determine who is responsible or what compensation they are owed when disruption crosses different operators and modes of transport. This uncertainty is itself a deterrent, particularly for time-sensitive trips.

The EU's Passenger Package (May 2026) is a meaningful step forward: it proposes that from 2027, passengers who miss a connection due to a delay will be automatically rerouted, with meals and accommodation covered if they miss the last service. However, as T&E has noted, the package does not yet fully resolve liability across journeys involving ferries and multiple operators¹⁰. Critically, the UK sits outside these reforms and will not be covered unless it acts independently. Clear, enforceable rights, introduced by both governments, would give travellers the confidence to choose Sail & Rail.

Our call to action

The three measures we have outlined are not complex, costly, or contentious. They require coordination, political will, and a shared commitment to making the lower-carbon option easier to choose. Neither government can deliver this alone. Given that the route crosses both jurisdictions, joint action between the UK and Ireland is essential.

We call on both governments to:

- Formally commit to working together to improve the Sail & Rail offer on the UK–Ireland corridor.
- Convene a joint working group with train and ferry operators, booking platforms, and consumer representatives to address timetabling coordination and booking accuracy.
- Bring forward a clear framework for passenger rights on combined multimodal journeys.
- Fund a coordinated public awareness campaign to raise the profile of Sail & Rail as a credible, comfortable, and affordable alternative to flying.

⁹ European Commission, Passenger Package: One Journey, One Ticket, Full Rights, 13 May 2026. Available at: transport.ec.europa.eu/passenger-package_en

¹⁰ Transport & Environment, EU Plans to Boost Rail Passenger Rights but Proposals Will Not Deliver a Huge Increase in International Train Travel, May 2026. Available at: www.transportenvironment.org/articles/eu-plans-to-boost-rail-passenger-rights-but-proposals-will-not-deliver-a-huge-increase-in-international-train-travel

- Engage with the EU's Passenger Package process and introduce domestic legislation in the UK to match the EU's emerging multimodal passenger rights framework, ensuring the UK-Ireland corridor keeps pace with improving European standards.

Our sixteen organisations stand ready to support both governments and the relevant operators in delivering these improvements. We would welcome the opportunity to meet with ministerial representatives from both governments to discuss how we can reduce emissions on one of Europe's most heavily flown short-haul corridors.

Yours sincerely,

Opportunity Green



Transport & Environment UK



Friends of the Earth Ireland



Friends of the Earth Ireland

Feasta



Transport Action Network



Aviation Environment Federation



Stop Climate Chaos



Children's Rights Over Flights



Climate Justice Universities Union



By Land And Sea.ie



Safe Landing



Wellbeing Economy Alliance England



Wellbeing Economy Alliance Scotland



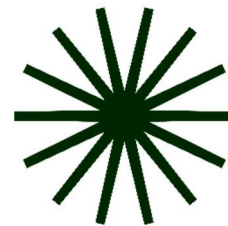
Wellbeing Economy Alliance Ireland



Flight Free UK



Irish Cycling Campaign



Irish Cycling Campaign