

**YSGOL ARDUDWY
HARLECH**

Evidence to the National Assembly for Wales's Children and Young People Committee:

Overcoming transport issues in a rural area in terms of travelling to school and ensuring full access to school activities

A large number of Ysgol Ardudwy's pupils travel to school by train. The train is vital for those travelling from the direction of Penrhyndeudraeth because neither full-sized nor small buses can use the road across the Briwet Bridge because of weight restrictions. Travelling by road involves a diversion through Maentwrog. The road is very narrow and winding between Maentwrog and Llandecwyn and there are often delays as a result of buses/lorries being unable to pass each other. This journey would add about half an hour to pupils' journey to school.

Traditionally, all pupils from villages in both directions from Barmouth to Minffordd would travel to school by train. However, the carriages have now been limited to two per train and there is not enough room for everyone. Therefore, three buses are provided as well as the trains. Only pupils from Barmouth, Penrhyndeudraeth and Minffordd travel solely by train, whereas pupils from Croesor and Llanfrothen take a bus to join the train.

School pupils' usage of the train has been very important to the railway line over the years. Indeed, many are of the opinion that the Cambrian Line would not have survived the Beeching cuts of the sixties were it not for school pupils and the problem of transporting them through Maentwrog if the line were to close.

However, the use of train services has not been without difficulty and over the years there have been serious problems with the afternoon train services, with trains regularly running 30 minutes or an hour late. Furthermore, transport was so poor in the area that holding after-school activities was extremely difficult since there were no means for pupils to be taken home afterwards. This restricted the extracurricular activities that could be provided by the school. For two days a week, a bus was hired to take children home to Penrhyndeudraeth following after-school activities but £80 a day was a lot for a relatively small rural school to pay. It made it possible for some pupils to stay on later, but the journey home was long and there were sometimes delays as the bus travelled along the arrow Maentwrog road.

Over the years, many meetings have been held with the train companies that were responsible for the line to try to tackle the problems and improve the situation, but by 2005 the situation had deteriorated to the point that trains were late on an almost daily basis. After Arriva Trains was awarded the Wales

franchise, meetings were held with the company in which Arriva admitted for the first time that the existing timetable was not sustainable and did not cater for the needs of the school or the public.

The idea of changing the school's opening and closing hours slightly to see whether this would better suit the train times had been suggested previously, but Arriva's predecessors were never willing to give this idea serious consideration. However, Arriva took a different view and immediately started to look into the situation in collaboration with the school. A compromise was reached that would ensure that the train company and Ysgol Ardudwy would both benefit.

Arriva undertook to provide regular services every two hours on the Cambrian Line and to ensure that train services would connect well with services on the Aberystwyth to Shrewsbury line to allow effective connections every time: prior to this an hour's wait in Machynlleth was common. It would also improve the service to Coleg Meirion-Dwyfor in Pwllheli in the morning since students would arrive late because the train had to service Harlech at 08.50.

Ysgol Ardudwy had to change its opening hours to 08.15 – 14.20 and reduced its lunch break to 35 minutes. As a result, the two trains from both directions can arrive at 08.10 and leave at 14.30, with the north-bound train arriving at Harlech at 14.10 and waiting for the pupils. Adding an extra 20 minutes to the timetable ensures that there is time to be regained if the train happens to be late. Moreover, the fact that there are other trains travelling in both directions at 16.15 ensures that extracurricular activities can be held after school. Arriva also agreed that pupils who live in the villages that are served by buses can use their bus tickets on the train to travel home because there are no convenient buses at that time of day. The school operates a request taxi service every afternoon to meet the second train from Penrhyndeudraeth to Llanfrothen and Croesor to ensure that people from all areas can get home safely and easily.

Since the new train times were introduced in September 2006, the school has been transformed as regards its transport arrangements – which could not be any better in terms timing and reliability. I can only remember the train being late on two occasions in the last four years and the delays occurred as a result of an accident and inclement weather.

The new arrangements have also transformed the opportunities that we can offer our pupils. We can now put on a far wider range of activities than was previously the case and can do so four nights a week. The number of pupils who stay on has increased significantly because transport is so convenient. In November, the school will stage the musical 'We Will Rock You' in Theatr Harlech and the cast is made up of over 80 pupils. In the past, not even half this number would have stayed on night after night for the rehearsals, but by now it is possible for pupils from all over the catchment area to get home quickly and easily.

The school successfully applied for an Assembly Community Focused Schools Grant to further develop this provision. A homework club is held every night and the school's resource centre has computer facilities for pupils whose families do not own a home computer. A total of 16 clubs/sporting activities are held over the four evenings and special attention is paid to important areas of development and current Assembly Government strategic priorities such as fitness and health, entrepreneurship, learning an additional modern foreign language and engineering, as well as activities to help talented pupils to develop, such as a theatre and arts club.

As a result of being able to offer this programme of activities and suitable transport, Ysgol Ardudwy can ensure that all pupils are treated equally. In the past, it was often the case that only pupils whose families could come to pick them up by car could take advantage of these facilities and activities, and of course, it was the poorest families who did not have computer facilities at home and who could not afford to send their children to evening activities.

The railway company and the area itself certainly benefited from the new train service and, as a result, the numbers that use the line have increased, which will hopefully safeguard its future.

None of this would have been possible without the excellent collaboration that took place between us and Arriva Trains Wales, especially Ben Davies, then manager for north Wales and officers at Gwynedd Council's education department, who were very supportive in discussions with the company. Not only must it be an innovative step for a private company to collaborate in a very effective manner with the public sector in the field of transport, but there have also been invaluable benefits for us and the area.

Tudur Williams
Head

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