

Equality of Opportunity Committee

EOC(3)-09-10 : Paper 1

Inquiry into the Accessibility of Railway Stations - Welsh Assembly Government Evidence Paper by the Deputy First Minister and Minister for the Economy and Transport

Purpose

1. This Paper presents evidence to the Equality of Opportunity Committee for its inquiry into the accessibility of railway stations in Wales. It explains how the Welsh Assembly Government discharges its statutory powers and the approach that we take to deliver rail improvements in Wales. It is important to note however that railway accessibility is not devolved. I welcome this opportunity to provide evidence and look forward to seeing the Committee's Report. The Welsh Assembly Government is committed to improving accessibility for all people to all modes of transport and we have only just started on what is a long term programme of work. This requires cooperation and investment from other stakeholders as there is a confluence of interest in making accessibility better for all people to have the opportunity to be able to travel without barriers.

Railway statutory responsibilities

2. Under the Railways Act 2005, Welsh Ministers received devolution of certain powers for rail matters in Wales from the Secretary of State for Transport. These powers were fully enabled as from April 2006. Principally they provide:

Co-signatory responsibility for the Wales and Borders franchise, awarded to Arriva Trains Wales (ATW) by the former Strategic Rail Authority in 2003, with a term until December 2018. The franchise, as noted in ATW's evidence paper to the Committee, includes no meaningful provision for accessibility improvements or for growth in passenger demand. The Railways Act 2005 provided Welsh Ministers with powers to specify and fund services under the Wales and Borders franchise, currently operated by ATW, within or to and from Wales ("Welsh Services"). The Secretary of State retains responsibility for those services running wholly in England. There was a Public Expenditure transfer from the Department of Transport (DfT) to Welsh Assembly Government to meet the cost of the subsidy payable to ATW in respect of Welsh Services. The DfT retained the funding for ATW's England-only services.

Power to invest in rail improvements which benefit Wales. There was no Public Expenditure transfer in respect of these powers and any such investment has been funded by the Welsh Assembly Government's own Budget.

A requirement for the Secretary of State to consult Welsh Ministers before letting any other franchises which run into Wales (for example, long distance services to Swansea/west Wales, Holyhead and the Nottingham services).

3. When the Railways Act 2005 powers became enabled in 2006, Welsh Ministers' immediate priorities were to improve punctuality and customer satisfaction with the existing franchisee, as well as investing in enhancement schemes to meet current and forecast increased demand.

4. In 2006, we commissioned the Wales Rail Planning Assessment, which set out future demand forecasts and provided the evidence base for the Rail Forward Programme. Since then, we have been successful in improving performance on punctuality, which is now above the national average, and customer satisfaction is also improved. We launched an intensive programme of capital investment in rail infrastructure improvements under the Rail Forward Programme which, for example, includes the current major schemes for the regeneration of Newport Station and the Cambrian Main Line enhancements. Numerous other capital schemes and service improvements are under development.

5. We are now beginning to invest heavily in accessibility improvements, as I set out below. Nevertheless, I recognise that this will be a long journey set against the context of the large number of stations requiring improvement and the historic legacy of accessibility issues.

6. As Rail Forward Programme schemes have been designed as new build or extensive rebuild schemes, this has provided us with the opportunity to start afresh and embed the principle of exemplary access, and designs taking active account of user group views into all projects.

7. In some cases, as with our Easier Access Installations at Aberdyfi and Valley stations, this enables people with mobility difficulties to start using their local railway for the first time and makes life easier for all people.

National non-devolved railway responsibilities

8. The Railways Act 2005 did not devolve any powers to Welsh Ministers to direct Network Rail's core activities, which are the operation, maintenance and renewal of the railway infrastructure. This remains a non-devolved responsibility of the Secretary of State and the DfT retains the budget and responsibility for Network Rail's programmes. No funding has been transferred to Welsh Ministers for these activities.

9. Railway accessibility is also a non-devolved matter with responsibility and funding retained by the DfT. The current Wales and Borders franchise does not require the franchisee to invest in accessibility improvements. Network Rail, the infrastructure owner, states in its evidence paper to the Committee that it is not required to improve the accessibility of existing stations, as older stations have "Grandfather Rights", which means that they are not covered by the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA). This means that Network Rail has no statutory responsibility for improving its existing stations, and I am highlighting this to the Committee as it sets out the scale of the challenges ahead. All new stations and any that are substantially improved have to meet the requirements of the Act.

10. Even though we have no statutory responsibility for improving accessibility or for the national funding, the Welsh Assembly Government believes that investing in improved accessibility is the right thing to do. Improving railway accessibility is the highest priority for rail improvements identified in the National Transport Plan. My priority is to help people where it matters most. The UK Government is responsible for the specification and funding of the outputs required from Network Rail, following consultation with the Welsh Assembly Government, on an England and Wales basis. We have identified improved railway accessibility in Wales as a key priority for Control Period 5 in our discussions to date with UK Government on the next High Level Output Statement which will set funding and outputs for the railway across England and Wales for the period 2014-2018. We shall keep our statutory powers for the railway under review.

Welsh Assembly Government stations

11. The Welsh Assembly Government has to date funded 11 new stations. These are the stations on the Ebbw Valley Railway, Vale of Glamorgan Railway and new stations at Abercynon, Llanharan and Newport. They each include fully DDA compliant access. Dedicated disabled parking spaces were provided at all of the stations with parking provision, and the information points on new platforms provide visual and audible information about train arrivals and departures. Visual information is also provided for those people with hearing difficulties through the Customer Information Services screens.

12. The current major Newport Station Regeneration scheme, for completion prior to the Ryder Cup, is a joint investment between the Assembly Government and Network Rail. By September, it will deliver a thoroughly modern new station, incorporating a ground-breaking new entrance, concourse, retail facilities and a new footbridge providing, for the first time, exemplary accessibility for the station area. In addition, we are providing funding support to Newport Council for upgrading the pedestrian route over the railway which links the centre with Devon Place and the Gold Tops area.

Stations in Wales

13. ATW has provided an evidence paper to the Committee. It contains the information about their 244 stations which they lease from Network Rail, 220 of which are in Wales. In summary, only a small minority are staffed, slightly less than 50 per cent are described as fully accessible to older and disabled passengers.

14. This is an unacceptable level of accessibility, and we are improving it across three important partnership work streams:

the national England and Wales DfT-funded Access for All and National Station Improvements schemes,

our own enhanced National Stations Improvement Programme+ programme for the Convergence area,

the Easier Access Installation Programme. Each of these is described below.

Access for All

15. In 2005, the DfT announced the Access for All programme for access improvements at stations across the national rail network. It is a £370 million programme over the 10 years to 2015. DfT selected the stations to be improved, with the majority of funding targeted at improving cross-platform access at the most heavily used stations. Stations allocated funding in Wales are:

Abergavenny,

Bridgend,

Neath,

Prestatyn - where the scheme for a new accessible footbridge commenced on site February 2010, with Welsh Assembly Government enhancement funding for a DDA accessible toilet and ticket office access.

Wrexham General,

Severn Tunnel Junction.

16. A number of smaller schemes have also been funded by DfT grant, with match funding by Welsh Assembly Government. These include:

The current scheme at Cardiff Central to provide a lift to Platform Zero. This is the departure point for trains on the popular Ebbw Valley Railway. The ratio of Welsh Assembly Government/DfT funding is some 3:1 for this scheme.

Improvements to access for ticket office and DDA toilet - Prestatyn;

Carmarthen - accessibility improvements to ticket office;

Llanelli, Llandudno Junction and Machynlleth - provision of DDA accessible toilets.

induction loops at 27 stations;

remote control for lifts at Bangor, Rhyl and Colwyn Bay, to allow their use outside staff hours;

disabled parking improvements at 21 stations;

National Stations Improvement Programme/NSIP+

17. In 2007, the DfT announced the National Stations Improvement Programme - a £150 million programme to improve stations across England and Wales. ATW was allocated £6 million for Wales and Borders, within which £4.5 million was allocated to stations in Wales. Welsh Assembly Government committed an additional £3 million to enhance the initial programme.

18. I was not satisfied that this programme went far enough and wanted to expand both the number of stations being improved and to add to the scope of the scheme. In particular, I wanted the programme to extend to cover exemplary accessibility wherever there is a major improvement scheme, ease of interchange, best practice integration with walking and cycling, linkage with regeneration programmes, excellence in design standard, harmony with the built environment and the promotion of sustainability.

19. I shall be announcing in the near future the funding package for the National Stations Improvement Programme + (NSIP+). Both the number of stations and the scope of the improvement projects will be enhanced significantly.

20. The NSIP+ enhancements include the following:

plans for certain projects to be expanded to include exemplary DDA accessibility to all platforms.

Swansea High Street Station is the first major NSIP+ scheme in Wales, with contractors due on site shortly, and, key to our approach, has involved extensive discussion and informal consultation with local community interests and user groups.

The major scheme for Llandudno, to provide modernised buildings and a new all-modes interchange, will be completing feasibility appraisal shortly and will also include audio wayfinding and audible public announcements.

Easier Access Programme (Stepping distances and heights from platforms to trains)

21. Under NSIP+, working in partnership with Network Rail and ATW we are delivering a low cost but durable solution to historic stepping height problems across rural rail routes in Wales. Initially, an easier access installation (hump) was installed at Aberdyfi in December 2009 and is enormously popular with train users. It has successfully completed its pilot period and is now a confirmed long-term installation. A second installation at Valley on Angelsey was completed May 2010.

22. I shall announce the details of the roll out of this programme in the near future. Each location will be subject to a detailed community consultation as were Aberdyfi and Valley, where there were 100% supportive consultation responses.

23. In addition, ATW will be undertaking this year a complementary package of off-platform access improvements where humps are being installed. Again, I shall announce the details in the near future.

Public Transport Users' Committee

24. I shall be announcing detailed plans shortly. The Committee will be mainstreaming accessibility in all aspects of its work. One member will be the Welsh Nomination on the Disabled Persons Advisory Committee. The Committee will be responsible for looking at a variety of transport issues including access to public transport in Wales. I shall be asking the Committee to make arrangements to inform priorities for the NSIP+ programme and to review its effectiveness in meeting people's needs.

Staff training and development

25. All staff in my Transport Department receive advice and support from the Equalities Support Unit within the Department of Enterprise and Transport. The Unit provides training in applying the Human Rights-based approach in everyone's day-to-day work, and this is very popular.

User Group railtours

26. The Equalities Support Unit, together with the Rail Team within Transport and ATW, have conducted rail accessibility inspection tours for representatives of the Equality Commission, the MS Society Cymru, the Guide Dogs for The Blind Association and the Association of Train Operating Companies' Disability and Inclusion Unit. These have enabled a very thorough examination of some of the accessibility issues we have with stations and, the provision of some very useful advice from the user groups for incorporation into our improvements programme. For example, as a direct result of comments received from the Guide Dogs for The Blind Association, improvements to tactile paving at and around the Swansea High Street Station are being included in the scheme. We shall continue this detailed working with user groups as part of putting them at the core of future developments.

Future priorities

27. In the discussions with DfT preparatory to the Funding Statement for the next railway Control Period (from April 2014), Welsh Assembly Government has already indicated that improved accessibility is a key priority. In particular, Cardiff Central and Queen Street stations will be benefiting from accessibility improvements, with full DDA accessibility for the new Valleys Platform 8 and for all platforms at Queen Street under the improvements associated with the Cardiff Resignalling scheme.

Conclusion

28. This evidence paper sets out my approach to investing in improving access for everyone, which I am seeking to maintain despite the challenging forward budgeting pressures, because I genuinely believe that improving accessibility for people is key to unlocking socio economic and health and wellbeing benefits, but also because this is what people tell us they need and deserve.

29. Even though the funding of accessibility improvements is non devolved to the Assembly Government, I am taking action to improve access on trains and at stations as this is an important part of the One Wales aim to provide a fairer and just society for all people. I remain committed to this principle and the investment in NSIP+ demonstrates the scale of our intentions to make real improvements to people's lives and I will continue to make the case for funding this activity during the challenging budgetary situation we find ourselves in.

30. As I have explained, we are still in the relatively early stages of improving railway accessibility and much remains to be done. We have achieved some initial success, and our involvement of user groups and communities has been very welcome. We want to make delivery more coherent and joined up, and to ensure that the finished improvement does actually meet people's needs. We want to bring planners, promoters and users together to agree design and functionality and are committed to doing so. I look forward greatly to the assistance of the new Public Transport Users' Committee in this future work.

<http://wales.gov.uk/topics/transport/rail/WalesRailPlanningAssessment/?lang=en>