

North Wales Regional Committee NWR 02-03 (min)

MINUTES

Date: Friday 7 March 2003
Time: 10.00 am to 12.50 pm
Venue: Arfon Leisure Centre, Caernarfon

Attendance

Members

Peter Rogers, Chair	North Wales
Eleanor Burnham	North Wales
Alison Halford	Delyn
Gareth Jones	Conwy
Ieuan Wyn Jones	Anglesey
Tom Middlehurst	Alyn and Deeside
John Marek	Wrexham
Janet Ryder	North Wales
Dafydd Wigley	Caernarfon

In attendance

Jonathan Melsom (item 3)	Strategic Rail Authority
David Smith (item 3)	Strategic Rail Authority
Denzil Jones (item 3)	Head of Transport Policy Division, Welsh Assembly Government

Secretariat

Siwan Davies

Committee Clerk

Vaughan Watkin

Deputy Committee Clerk

Item 1: Introduction, apologies and declarations of interest

1.1 The Chair welcomed the members of the Committee, attendees and members of the public to the meeting.

1.2 Apologies had been received from Ann Jones, David Ian Jones, Alun Pugh, Karen Sinclair and Dafydd Elis-Thomas.

Item 2: Minutes of previous meeting 31 January 2003

2. NWR 01-03 (min)

2.1 The Committee approved the minutes of the meeting held on 31 January.

2.2 The Chair reported that following the meeting he had written to the Minister for Environment asking that she take the opportunity of the current review of flood funding mechanisms and administrative arrangements to develop a 'made in Wales' approach. The First Minister had also followed up the actions arising from his question and answer session.

Item 3: Rail Services in North Wales

3.1 The Strategic Rail Authority (SRA) had been invited to outline the main elements of their Strategic Plan for 2003 and other matters relevant to North Wales. Committee Members had previously met with the SRA and Virgin, also with the bidders for the Wales & Borders rail franchise, and the Chair had written the Minister for Environment setting out the Committee's aspirations for rail services.

3.2 In his presentation, Jonathan Melsom said that:

- The SRA was still committed to the goals set out in the Strategic Plan 2002 for growth in passenger and freight traffic, and the relief of overcrowding. The rate of

growth depended on getting a grip on industry costs;

- Although year on year spend on rail remained up, the SRA was operating under a reduced budget in 2003-4. This meant some difficult decisions in respect of discretionary grant regimes and led to de-scoping of major projects;
- An up-lift in budget would need to be justified and the SRA would need to develop a robust case for Rail in discussions with Ministers;
- Wales & Borders franchise remained on track for October 2003. Bidders had been asked to exemplify the effects of reductions in subsidy, but the SRA had also sought prices for enhancements. It was too early to comment on the detailed impact of such proposals, but the SRA recognised the importance of rail in rural communities;
- The SRA noted and understood the concern regarding station facilities in North Wales – the new franchise operator would be expected to address this problem, and noted the recent announcement by Welsh Assembly Government to provide funding for schemes in South Wales and commitment to follow this up in North Wales once stations transfer to new operator;
- The SRA recognised the demand for rail, as indicated by the growth on North Wales coast, and by the significant increases in recent months on the Chester - Shrewsbury route, with Wrexham showing a 40% increase in patronage;
- The SRA confirmed that the plans for Virgin services to North Wales were still under consideration, but that it was not possible to add anything further at this stage.

3.3 Discussion with Members focused on:

- Calls for the Assembly to have power of direction over the SRA and for increased Welsh representation on the SRA.
- The 'Cinderella status' of North Wales rail services. Promised improvement to rail services in North Wales needed to be delivered, in particular for services to London and South Wales. The SRA were working on improvements between Holyhead-Cardiff and London, but there were problems due to lack of rolling stock. The SRA had to integrate the needs of various stakeholders, such as the

West Coast mainline. A revised timetable would be issued in summer 2004.

- Calls for Wales to receive a Barnett formula share of rail funding and concerns about the lack of transparency of the level of subsidy for rail services in Wales, in particular the Wales and Borders rail franchise. The SRA explained that this figure could not be confirmed due to commercial confidentiality and the lack of consolidated accounts for the Welsh elements of the two current franchises that would merge to create Wales & Borders.
- Concern that funding was being spent in South Wales and the South East of England, rather than North Wales. The SRA said that spending in England also benefited Welsh travellers, but Members felt this reflected English, not Welsh priorities.
- Concern that the SRA had invited the bidders for the Wales and Borders franchise to indicate the services that could be delivered with 10% and 20% cuts in subsidy alongside proposals for enhancements.
- The need for safety to be addressed, particularly at road crossing points.
- Support for electrification of the North Wales line, possibly funded by Objective 1. The SRA indicated that they were looking into options for future capacity. Denzil Jones would provide Gareth Jones will information on the position on increasing headroom on the electrification scheme at the A55 Penmaenbach Headland Railway Scheme to allow for future electrification.
 5. The Chair advised the meeting that residents of Mold and Kinmel Bay have written to the Committee outlining their concerns about rail services. He would be taking up their concerns with the Minister.
 6. The following points were raised by members of the audience:
- Cllr W J Williams, TAITH, said that promised improvements to rail services between North Wales and London, such as seven Virgin super voyager trains a day, had not been delivered. North Wales received a 'Cinderella service', with the UK Government's ten year plan focused on improved services in England, such as the West Coast mainline. Cllr Matthews, Flintshire County Council and TAITH, agreed that services in North Wales had got worse as the SRA were targeting resources in South East England. The SRA acknowledged the frustration for stakeholders when train operating companies made promises that they could not deliver.

- Alun Griffith, Council for the Blind Cardiff, asked if any steps were being taken to fulfil the needs of visually impaired and other disabled travellers. Barry Meade, Denbigh Access group said that access for the disabled was not satisfactory and in some instances disabled travellers had been taken by taxi to other stations that could provide the necessary disabled access. All rail companies had been issued with guidance on provision of service for disabled travellers. However, the SRA acknowledged the need for better progress across the network.
- Cllr June Marshall asked why greater use was not being made of Objective 1 funding for transport projects. Denzil Jones of the Welsh Assembly Government acknowledged from a transport perspective that it was disappointing that only £50 million of Objective 1 funds had been allocated to transport. The Wales European Funding Office had identified projects, which were being processed. Any additional funds that could be obtained would require match funding.
- Owen Prosser, Railway Restoration Movement, supported the recent calls for the Assembly to have control over rail matters in Wales. Cllr Carwyn Jones, Llangefni Council, and prospective Labour Assembly candidate agreed.
- Nigel Jones, Clerk of Flint Town Council, said that despite promises there were still no inter-service stops made in Flintshire.

3.7 The Chair asked the SRA to reflect on the points raised by the audience. He would also write to the Minister for Environment drawing her attention to the concerns raised.

Item 4: Review of the work of the Committee

1. Gareth Jones and Eleanor Burnham summarised the work of the Committee during their time as Committee Chair, 1999-2000 and 2001-02 respectively. Apologies had been received from Ann Jones, second Chair of the Committee, and Alison Halford summarised the work of the Committee during 2000-01. Peter Rogers, current Chair, summarised the work of the Committee since July 2002.

4.2 Janet Ryder said she valued the scrutiny of the regional activities of national bodies and the opportunity for Members and the public to question the First Minister. She suggested that the successor committee look at the changes to the National Health Service in Wales, in particular the creation of new Local Health Boards in the region.

4.3 The Chair invited members of the public to comment on the work of the Committee and offer suggestions for the successor committee post election. The following observations were made:

- Charlotte Williams, University of Wales, Bangor, observed that the meeting offered limited time for the public to have their say, and suggested a greater role for audience participation. However, this required emotional energy on the part of individuals and it could be damaging if their contributions were not acknowledged. The 'jargon' used in the presentations was inaccessible, and the format and topics of the meeting of little interest to young people. She suggested that feedback should focus on outcomes and impact of actions arising from previous meetings.
- Eleri Thomas, Save the Children Fund, Sasha Huws, Pena Davies, Gwynedd Youth Service, and other members of the audience supported the need for greater involvement of young people in the work of the Committee and politics generally. Eleri Thomas offered to work with the successor committee on engaging young people in their work, for example by dedicating a meeting to a discussion of the future of young people in North Wales, or by inviting children to make presentations at meetings.
- Gareth Jones, Association of Head Teachers Flintshire, suggested that the successor committee consider education funding with a representative of ELWa present to answer questions.
- Lucy Owen, pupil at Ysgol Tryfan, Bangor, asked whether ELWa would continue to fund certain courses undertaken at schools rather than higher education colleges. **The Chair would seek advice from the Minister for Education and Lifelong Learning and respond in writing.**
- Owen Prosser, Railway Restoration Movement, felt that Regional Committees were a refreshing contrast to traditional politics.
- Cllr Ivor Roberts, Flintshire County Council, welcomed Regional Committees and the opportunity to speak at meetings, but considered that feedback could be improved. He valued the opportunity to listen to Assembly Members, but felt it was important that they stay for the duration of the meeting. Cllr Meurig Lloyd Davies, Denbighshire County Council, agreed. He called for more time for questioning of Assembly Members on a range of topics by members of the public. He also suggested that the full Assembly meet in North Wales once a year.

- A member of the audience suggested that a 'reference group' be established to help draw up the work programme of the successor committee.

4.4 Members agreed with the need to increase public engagement with the Committee, and with young people in particular. However, they suggested a balance be struck between the Committee's scrutiny work and role as facilitator of public debate.

4.5 The Chair thanked the audience for their constructive feedback, which would be presented to the successor committee after the election. He paid tribute to Dafydd Wigley, Alison Halford and Tom Middlehurst, who were retiring from the Assembly at the election in May.

Item 5: Date of Next Meeting

5.1 This was the last meeting of the Committee during the current Assembly. Regional Committees would be established after the election and details of their first meetings would be advertised in due course.

Committee Secretariat

March 2003