

Senedd Cymru
Pwyllgor yr Economi, Seilwaith a Sgiliau

Effeithiau COVID-19: Galwad Agored am
dystiolaeth a phrofiadau
EIS(5) COV - 17
Ymateb gan: RMT

Welsh Parliament
Economy, Infrastructure and Skills
Committee

Impacts of COVID-19: Open Call for
evidence and experiences

Response from: RMT

RMT written evidence for Economy, Infrastructure and Skills Committee (EIS) inquiry on impact of Covid-19

Introduction

The National Union of Rail Maritime & Transport Workers (RMT) is the largest rail union in Wales and the only union representing all grades. RMT is also the only union for seafarer ratings in Wales.

Engagement with employers and government

Any consideration of the impact of Covid -19 on transport in Wales cannot be confined to services overseen by Transport for Wales (TFW), such as the TFW rail franchise operated by KeolisAmey. There are also a number of cross – border rail franchises let by the UK namely Great Western, Avanti -West Coast. In addition, Network Rail is owned by the UK government and is responsible for all Wales rail infrastructure and signalling, with the exception of the Core Valley Lines.

To date there has been regular engagement with both the Welsh Government and rail employers during the pandemic. With regards to the largest employers this has been either directly with TFW and KeolisAmey or through the UK - wide Rail Industry Coronavirus Forum (RICF) which brings together all the train operating companies (including Transport for Wales Rail Services) and Network Rail to discuss industry employment and safety matters.

Key safety issues

Currently allowing social distancing dictates that train loading should only be 15 – 20%. RMT's position is that any easing of lockdown must continue to only allow essential journeys / workers and to allow the maintenance and enforcement of two metre social distancing on transport.

The Welsh government should introduce compulsory wearing of appropriate face coverings for passengers on trains and stations to provide protection on services and also to avoid confusion and pressure on staff with regards to cross border services in and out of England where face coverings are compulsory. It should be noted however that the recent requirement for passengers to wear face coverings in England (which RMT has long campaigned for) is not as strong as it should be as the legislation only applies when passengers are on the train and not when they are in a station which is often as crowded and confined as a train.

RMT is also concerned face coverings are not used to abandon or replace effective social distancing and other measures. We continue to insist for all members that

- Restrict passenger travel to essential journeys only, for as long as possible
- If 2 metres social distancing can't be maintained, agreed protection must be in place
- Non-PPE standard masks such as surgical masks and face coverings are no excuse to allow over-crowding or breaches of 2 metre social distancing
- Tasks must be Risk Assessed and Safe Systems of Work created and agreed with RMT Representatives according to the circumstances and in order to protect staff and public in the current Coronavirus emergency.
- Risk Assessments and revised Safe Systems of Work may mean that PPE is required in order to protect the wearer, such as face masks, visors and gloves. Where such PPE is required, it must be of a sufficient PPE standard as agreed with RMT Representatives to protect the wearer.
- Where provided, PPE must be adequate and always available
- Such situations may include, but are not limited to, working on gatelines, providing passenger assistance and interaction with passenger's on-board trains
- We continue to advise all of our members of their their legal right to withdraw to a place of safety if they feel threatened by Covid – 19.

Current issues that need to be resolved

- With regard to other specific protections TfW have so far issued guards with scripted announcements, striped tape and a laminated sheet to discourage passengers from entering rear vestibules. RMT is aware that some UK train companies have introduced stronger protections, including the blocking of parts of trains for staff access for the purpose of their duties, for example by signage and Perspex sheets, and have also instigated marking of seats and areas of the train to encourage passengers to social distance whilst travelling. RMT wishes TfW to adopt best practice from around the UK.
- There is also still a requirement for improved signage and marking on train and stations to ensure 2 metre social distancing and it is disappointing that notices dropped the 2-meter social distancing to just say keep social distance.
- RMT is also concerned that there are a number of short platforms across the TfW network, many of which require local instructions that only middle doors can be operated for boarding and alighting trains. In these circumstances, a guard would be required to pass through at least one carriage of the train to get to the said door to be opened. On passing through carriages with passengers, with the width of trains being about 2.5 metres, RMT is concerned that the 2 metre distancing guidelines will be broken.
- We are also concerned that trains being run into main hubs such as Cardiff, Manchester and Birmingham are sometimes short formed making social distancing of two metres impossible.

Support for transport services and transport workers

The fall in passenger revenue resulted in the Welsh government bailing out Keolis Amey with an immediate emergency package of £40 million in march and then a further package of £65 million in May to ensure the level of ‘skeleton service’.

Rail workers have by and large continued to be fully employed as they have been designated key workers, although some staff have been furloughed.

Our members our key workers who have kept essential goods and workers moving in Wales. They have been lauded as heroes but in some instances as outlined below are not being treated as heroes.

Axis cleaners dispute, Transport for Wales

The majority of cleaners who work on Transport for Wales’s Wales and Borders franchise are employed by Axis Cleaning and Support Services. This contract was signed by Arriva Trains Wales and taken over by Keolis Amey when they took over the franchise in 2018.

These cleaners have substantially inferior pay and conditions of employment to cleaning staff who are directly employed by Transport for Wales. TfW cleaners receive higher salaries, better sick pay, a final salary pension scheme, additional annual leave, free travel facilities and better overtime rates.

Understandably, Axis cleaners are angry at the unfairness of their treatment and RMT submitted a claim to win them parity of pay and conditions with TfW cleaners. It is Axis’s failure to meet that claim that resulted in the current dispute. In May 2020, RMT began balloting members for industrial action. The ballot closed on 12 June 2020 and members voted by 75% on an 81% turnout for strike action and action short of a strike. Strike action has been called for three days continuously beginning on Thursday 2 July.

In parallel, RMT has written to the Welsh government and Transport for Wales calling for these cleaners to be brought in-house. In 2018, the union had discussions with both Keolis Amey and TfW following which we received a commitment that the Axis cleaners would be brought into direct employment either with TfW or Keolis Amey. In fact, there has been no progress on this and Keolis Amey recently granted Axis a 12-month contract extension.

The outsourcing of cleaning is at the root of the injustice that has fuelled this dispute. The immediate dispute can be resolved through action to achieve parity with TfW cleaners but RMT also seeks a decisive move to end the unnecessary, unfair and inefficient outsourcing of these cleaners. Cleaners have proved themselves as core and key workers in fighting Covid – 19, this needs to be recognised with cleaners bought in – house as soon as possible.

CAF Rolling stock union recognition

RMT has continued concerns regarding the continued lack of union recognition by CAF rolling stock at their Newport depot. We have met with Transport for Wales and Welsh Government previously where we raised our concerns that CAF were not being accommodating with regards to Trade Union involvement at their Newport, South Wales site.

This resulted in a meeting with CAF where they made clear that they saw a distinction between RMT involvement in Train Operating Company maintenance depot and the CAF

Newport site which they saw an assembly site. Their intention is to ship Trains in and assemble Trains at the site, they also mentioned that the site may be used for assembly of other than Trains.

CAF are now beginning to ramp up and recruit their new workforce at the Newport site, and we are increasingly concerned that they are planning on shutting out RMT Union when we are clearly the Rail Union and have membership inside the plant. This has now become even more important during the Covid -19 crisis where workers are obviously anxious about the local and wider economic impacts of this crisis.

Core Valley Lines

RMT campaigning previously secured a commitment from the previous First Minister that when Transport for Wales took over ownership of the rail infrastructure Network Rail staff affected by the transfer of the Core Valley Lines would remain in the public sector employed by Transport for Wales with protections for jobs and conditions.

However, in breach of the spirit of that agreement new infrastructure staff employed on the Core Valley Lines are being employed by KeolisAmey Infrastructure.

RMT has two serious concerns in this respect. Firstly, the new staff are being employed on inferior terms and conditions so allowing a two - tier work force to develop. Secondly deploying privately employed staff on rail infrastructure may begin to put commercial considerations before safety. RMT is in discussion to ensure all Core Valleys infrastructure staff are employed directly in the public sector by Transport for Wales.

Maritime issues

In March, Stena Line unilaterally scrapped the sick pay scheme for seafarers and dockers, including those working from Fishguard and Holyhead. And on 6 April the company issued notice of 150 redundancies, including 55 Ratings working on the Stena Adventurer, Stena Europe and Stena Estrid and a number of dockers and port staff in Holyhead and Fishguard. 40 seafarers on temporary contracts in Holyhead were also dismissed so Stena Line has in effect cut nearly 200 seafarer and docker jobs, mostly in Wales since the pandemic started. 600 Stena Line staff have been furloughed, with around 400 of those workers living in Wales.

These are jobs and skills that the Welsh economy can ill afford to lose, particularly as demand for seafarer skills is expected to increase in other areas of the economy such as offshore wind and coastal shipping. RMT estimate that there were 1,200 seafarers and 900 port workers workforce in Wales in 2018. The new E-Flexer ferry on the Holyhead-Dublin route has been taken to Cairnryan to fix an engine problem and without mitigation measures, Stena Line's response in the Irish Sea to the Covid-19 crisis will hit hard in deprived port communities like Holyhead and Fishguard, where it is port owner, land owner and a major employer.

In 2019, Stena Line recruited 65 seasonal catering assistants and 11 deck rating apprentices. None of those apprentices were trained in a maritime college in Wales, because there isn't one. RMT has responded to the consultation over new Apprentice Frameworks in Wales and it is essential that seafarer apprenticeships become a formal part of the Welsh Government's ambition for young people – we can no longer rely on ad hoc training programmes at individual companies – and a maritime college in Wales is desperately needed.

Stena Line's competitor on Holyhead-Dublin and Fishguard-Rosslare is Irish Ferries which has operated a Flag of Convenience fleet since 2005. This sees largely eastern European seafarers crewing ships registered in Cyprus and the Bahamas in the Irish Sea, and paid well below the legal minimum in the UK or Ireland to work months at sea. Irish Ferries do not recognise UK or Irish trade unions and has dished out dividends of over £132m since 2012 off the backs of exploited seafarers, as well as undercutting Stena Line which is a direct, long term threat to Welsh seafarers' jobs.

RMT is in dialogue with the Welsh Government over the Social Partnership Bill and we welcome this as a potentially positive step toward stronger trade union rights and more jobs for Welsh seafarers.

Operators on the Holyhead-Dublin route, Stena Line and Irish Ferries are not in receipt of the UK Government's Critical Freight Grant. Stena Line is receiving £6.2m from the taxpayer for routes from other UK ports but there are no employment or other conditions attached to this public support. Both operators were included in the UK Government's Freight Capacity Framework Agreement which put in place contracting arrangements that will come into effect in the event of a no-deal Brexit.

Holyhead is the largest port in Wales for roll on roll off road freight and second largest in the UK after Dover. It is of critical importance to the Welsh economy and our members are maintaining the maritime supply chain in the Irish Sea during the Covid-19 crisis. The Irish Government supported Stena with a grant for Rosslare-Fishguard but not on the Holyhead-Dublin route. As the Deputy Minister for the Economy & Transport Lee Waters MS has said, we cannot wait for Stena Line to fail before the taxpayer bails out the operator on this route.

Without conditional taxpayer support, it is little wonder that Stena Line is seeking to retain 'the flexibility of local temporary contracts' when passenger numbers return.

Notwithstanding the fact that employment law is reserved, it is vital that the Welsh Government uses the full range of its devolved powers to protect Welsh maritime jobs and skills, especially in Holyhead from any attempts by Stena to adopt Irish Ferries' exploitative crewing practices after emergency Covid-19 restrictions are relaxed.

A £60m contract to refurbish the Grade-II listed breakwater in Holyhead has been tendered by Anglesey Council, even though Stena Line owns this critically important piece of national infrastructure. It is essential for the Welsh Government to take a stake in this work and to use this as a strategic lever to protect seafarer and port jobs in Holyhead.

A safe and sustainable recovery

There are currently not sufficient resources such as rolling stock and frequency of services to ensure public transport passengers and staff are safe as if demand begins to rise and 2m social distancing be maintained and it is vital that services remain confined to essential journeys.

While use of public transport like rail and buses has fallen sharply, car use and use of goods vehicles has recovered. Across the UK as a whole, car use fell to 32% on 31 March but is now back up to 62% and Heavy Goods Vehicle use fell to 39% before rising to 87%.

In Wales, as elsewhere in the British Isles, there is evidence that without action there will be longer-term damage to public transport use.

Polling published on 4 June indicates that 78% of people in Wales are concerned about using public transport. UK-level polling by *Transport Focus* indicates that currently 32% of people say they won't use public transport again for any reason until they feel safe. These surveys show that the proportion of people who say they will use public transport again once restrictions are lifted is around 22%., rising to 29% of previous public transport users and 35% of those with no car. 48% of respondents say they are more likely to drive in the future.¹

Thus the Covid - 19 pandemic has led to fears people will increasingly use the car instead of public transport. That will be disastrous for our climate and also devastating for public health as raised carbon emissions increase vulnerability to respiratory diseases and there is growing evidence air pollution is a factor in higher rates of Coronavirus deaths.

To stop the Coronavirus crisis accelerating the climate crisis and creating another public health emergency there needs to be a new deal for public transport. That means massively expanding transport operating subsidy, capital investment and capacity to make public transport services more frequent, affordable, attractive and safer to use.

As outlined previously until the pandemic TfW was run on a revenue cost sharing basis. The fall in passenger revenue resulted in the Welsh government bailing out Keolis Amey with an immediate emergency package of £40 million in march and then a further package of £65 million in May to ensure the level of 'skeleton service'.

As the service levels are pushed up this is expected to rise and the Minister Ken Skates said recently that the Welsh government estimated that socially distanced public transport would require public funding of £250 million per year on top of existing subsidy levels.²

The arguments for public ownership of the Wales and Borders franchise are now completely overwhelming. The public is carrying virtually all the costs of the railway and it is hard to see how commercial models can be made to work again while preserving social distancing.

The Welsh government should be pressing the UK government to bring in legislation to overturn the failed privatisation legislation, renationalise our railways and ensure public money is entirely reinvested in our railways rather than the pockets of profiteering train operating companies.

29th June 2020

¹ <https://d3cez36w5wymxj.cloudfront.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/11224442/Travel-during-Covid-19-survey-%E2%80%93-week-6.pdf>

² <https://gov.wales/written-statement-covid-19-impact-rail-bus-and-air-services-and-our-response>;
<https://gov.wales/65-million-set-aside-keep-wales-railway-running>

