

SWWITCH Response to consultation on NafW Enterprise & Business Committee's Inquiry into the Wales & Borders Franchise

Introduction

SWWITCH (South West Wales Integrated Transport Consortium) is a partnership of four local authorities comprising Carmarthenshire County Council, Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council, Pembrokeshire County Council and the City & County of Swansea.

The consortium is responsible for developing transport policy and delivering transport projects in the region, working closely with both the private sector, local interest groups and the Welsh Government.

1. What lessons can be learnt from the current franchise?

- 1.1 SWWITCH would wish to continue the good level of engagement enjoyed with the current franchise operator with any future franchise operator. This has been very helpful in promoting collaborative working, understanding the natural limitations of the operator and also identifying common opportunities. This open mode of working would be welcomed from the next operator of the franchise.
- 1.2 The current franchise model is considered to be lacking in that it presently does not incentivise the current operator to invest in the franchise, and promotes the status quo. SWWITCH thinks that the current operator has done well to adhere to the requirements of the franchise, but very little progress has been made to improve services offered over the term as a consequence of it not being a target or requirement of the franchise.
- 1.3 SWWITCH believes that there are likely to be a number of routes from which additional growth could be gained if served with greater frequency of services and improved quality in terms of rolling stock. The franchise operator is not however encouraged by the terms of the franchise to do this and opportunities may therefore have been missed.
- 1.4 Careful consideration over the length of the franchise is needed. A longer franchise would allow a franchisee to make brave and bold investment decisions, if the terms of the franchise set targets for improvement and encouraged innovation to meet growth and changing needs. A shorter period may mean there is unwillingness or inability to raise capital to secure significant improvements

2. What priorities can be identified to ensure passenger rail services in Wales and the Borders provide the best possible service for passengers from 2018?

- 2.1 The most common complaint in respect of current services is about the rolling stock being operated on the Wales & Borders franchise. The units are functional but do not promote public transport as being a quality alternative to private transport. SWWITCH has held public consultation events for a number of topics and when discussing rail services, it is the rolling stock which will commonly draw comment. The frequency and reliability of the current franchise is largely reported to be of an acceptable standard. SWWITCH would be very pleased to see an improvement to the rolling stock both in terms of the quality of the passenger

environment and also in terms of capacity, especially on the longer distance services to Manchester, where three car units should be provided as standard.

2.2 SWWITCH would like to see a number of improvements to the rolling stock which would promote the benefits of rail as opposed to car travel. Rail can have a number of advantages which are not being fully utilised at present; improving the train as an environment for working primarily through the implementation of Wi-Fi would be advantageous to passengers.

2.3 As the Inquiry will be aware, the National Assembly for Wales is currently considering the Active Travel Bill. SWWITCH believes that the Wales & Borders franchise should have an important role to play in facilitating multi-modal journeys from bicycle to train in order to encourage multi modal journeys and to enable rail passengers to access areas which are not directly connected to the railway line. This endorsement would however require a much more robust policy in respect of the transit of bicycles and would also need to be accompanied by an improvement of the rolling stock to allow the carriage of greater numbers of bicycles. Anecdotal feedback from the SWWITCH region would suggest that many cyclists are unable to carry their bicycle on the train each day because of this capacity constraint and so are having to make alternative arrangements, or indeed are making the decision not to cycle at all. SWWITCH believes this is a market that could be greatly expanded although it acknowledges that the provision for cycling as something that is intrinsically linked with rail would require a brave and innovative approach in respect of future franchises. However, in the context of the Welsh Government's commitment to the Active Travel Bill, it would seem important to address this at the franchise stage.

2.4 Rail usage and the promotion of sustainable transport modes would also benefit from increasing service frequency, reduced journey times and consideration of the opening or reopening of stations where appropriate and justified.

3. How can service delivery after 2018 deliver connectivity and value for money for passengers while reducing the burden on the tax payer?

3.1 SWWITCH would welcome the consideration of alternative franchise models. A 'not for dividend' franchise' is considered to be a potential means by which benefits could be delivered while also reducing local rail costs. The potential conflicts with competition law would obviously need to be considered where such a model was being run alongside other franchises operating under more conventional means.

3.2 In 2018 the electrification of the south Wales mainline will be completed and this alongside the new franchise should allow opportunities for blue sky thinking over the next 3 years about the best way to take advantages of the quicker, quieter and faster electric trains and the potential re-configuration of the franchise, alongside the GW franchise to create the best service possible for South west Wales.

3.3 With the announcement that Swansea Bay is the first City Region in Wales (co-terminus with SWWITCH), it is important that any model for the new franchise

focuses on ensuring that rail plays its part in helping to create an accessibility and connected City Region where businesses can flourish.

- 3.4 SWWITCH would not welcome the introduction of any alternative model where reliability and/or frequencies are not assured to increase with increasing passenger numbers, where rolling stock is not or cannot be improved or where it does not result in the reduction of journey times.