

INQUIRY INTO THE FUTURE OF THE WALES & BORDERS FRANCHISE

Submission by

NORTH CHESHIRE RAIL USERS' GROUP (NCRUG)

NCRUG are grateful to The Enterprise and Business Committee for the opportunity to comment upon the existing franchise with a view to identifying improvements for incorporation into the new 2018 franchise.

Geography

The current franchise, whilst having arms stretching into the Wirral, (Wrexham/Bidston) and North Cheshire, (Llandudno/Manchester), does not take sufficient account of the synergy which exists between the Liverpool City Region and the North Wales coast and North East Wales. These areas share common economic goals and an interdependence which is not reflected in the political and historical boundaries on which critical decisions are made. Furthermore, with the exception of the above two lines, the current franchise reinforces this separation. These boundaries are also reinforced by the transport network which tends to treat Liverpool City Region as one economic area and North and East Wales as another. The new franchise should take account of this disparity by providing much improved rail links between them.

New Opportunities

Liverpool John Lennon Airport is particularly relevant to the North Wales coast tourists attractions. Budget Airlines offer unique opportunities for expanding tourism in the area for both long weekend visits from the near Continent and longer week or fortnightly stays from further afield. There is an urgent need to eliminate the uncertain journey times which exist over the Runcorn/Widnes Silver Jubilee Road Bridge where a simple mechanical fault on a vehicle can create chaotic congestion over a wide area on both sides of the Mersey. Unfortunately, such happenings are not infrequent. More importantly they are entirely unpredictable. This inhibits road travel to/from the Airport and with totally inadequate rail services alternative markets are sought by intending visitors.

The Mersey Gateway scheme may alleviate some of these problems, in the short term, but will, in due course, lead to an increase, rather than a reduction, in road traffic. This is the normal result following completion of major road schemes. We do not feel it necessary to list some evidence of this statement as your committee will, no doubt, be aware of many such schemes where this has happened.

Business travel to/from North and North East Wales is hampered by the lack of rail connections to both Liverpool and Manchester Airports. Whilst the current franchise does allow through rail travel from the North Wales coast to Manchester Airport there is no opportunity to connect with Liverpool South Parkway and on to Liverpool Airport. North East Wales has no direct connection to either airport.

The new franchise should take steps to remedy this disconnect between all the areas mentioned above.

Helsby, Ellesmere Port, Hooton line

Currently the Ellesmere Port to Hooton section of this line is in the Merseyrail franchise and operates a frequent ½ hour through service, by electric third rail units, to Liverpool via the Loop line.

The Helsby to Ellesmere Port service is in the Northern franchise and consists of two early morning trains in each direction and two in late afternoon in each direction. This is not a useable service and serves only to meet minimum franchise obligations and as a means for Northern Rail to move their stock around to suit other services. The line from Helsby to Ellesmere Port, which has considerable potential for passenger use, is currently a 'stump' at the end of the line and serves no useful purpose for passengers. It carries a number of daily freight trains and the prospect of more when Quinn Glass and GrowHow start regular freight movements, scheduled to commence in 2014. However, there is, even when these freight movements commence, plenty of capacity on this section of line.

Since the regular service which ceased in the mid 1990's there has been considerable residential development in Elton. The Quinn Glass factory is now fully operational and currently employs 600+ of which some 70% live in Ellesmere Port. The factory is within short walking distance of Ince & Elton station and, therefore, represents a substantial potential market for rail use. The Stanlow Oil Refinery site is extensive with many companies operating within the site and offering employment.

In addition Shell at Stanlow has donated its Research & Development site at Thornton to Chester University as a new Engineering Faculty for about 1500 students. This will come into effect in 2015 and will generate a need for much improved public transport. Students, with limited funds, tend towards public transport rather than investing in private transport. The Thornton facility backs onto the railway line and is midway between Stanlow & Thornton station and Ince & Elton station. Quick access by foot or cycle to either or both stations could be provided at little cost or, alternatively, a new station could be built adjacent to the site.

Overcrowding

For a number of years NCRUG have witnessed a huge increase in passenger numbers on the Chester/Warrington Bank Quay/Manchester service. This has led to extensive overcrowding on peak trains, (usually three cars), and is now also progressing into off peak services.

To remedy this we suggest a ½ hourly instead of the current 1 hourly service.

We also suggest extending the service to Manchester Airport throughout the day or, at least, every other train.

Increase and agglomeration of services

NCRUG's suggested re-drawing of the northern section of the Wales & Borders Franchise map is shown in Appendix 1. Implementation of this arrangement with a regular and frequent service recognises and strengthens the synergy which exists between Liverpool City Region, North East

Wales, the North Wales Coast and the airports at Liverpool and Manchester. Appendix 1 shows the following changes from the existing franchise:-

- 1.1 Extension of the Wrexham/Bidston service to Birkenhead North to offer a more frequent connection with Merseyrail services. Whilst the under-used Platform 1 at Birkenhead North is available the crossover for the return journey is just beyond the station which could have a disruptive effect on Merseyrail services and may be unacceptable. Alternatively, there is a crossover towards Bidston but this would entail wrong line working for 990 yards. Nevertheless, if the service was extended to Birkenhead North and with a half hour frequency, we believe the improved connectivity would have substantial benefits. It could be considered as an interim step towards Wrexham trains running round the Liverpool Loop.
- 1.2 Re-instatement of Halton curve to bi-directional working. This is a vital link to Liverpool South Parkway and employment areas in south Liverpool of which Jaguar Landrover, (JLR), is a leading example. JLR are currently seeking, with Knowsley Council, to open their own station on the West Coast Main Line adjacent to their factory. Many of their employees live in Wales and commute daily by car. JLR provide parking space which they wish to use to expand their manufacturing facility on the site. Components are centralised in Wirral and are transported by road to JLR Halewood. Whilst freight does not form part of any passenger franchise this particular movement could be switched to rail if the Halton curve was re-opened. Passengers and freight would both benefit from this re-opening.

In the new franchise service patterns should be changed in such a way as to strengthen the economic ties to which we have referred above. This will entail, the following changes:-

- 2.1 Better connectivity at Shotton.
- 2.2 A more frequent service on Wrexham/Bidston line.
- 2.3 A new through service from Wrexham, via Halton curve, to Liverpool and Liverpool Airport.
- 2.4 A more frequent service on the Llandudno/Manchester line.
- 2.5 A new through service from Holyhead to Liverpool, via Halton curve.
- 2.6 A new service from Ellesmere Port, (and/or Hooton), to Liverpool and Liverpool Airport.
- 2.7 A new service from Ellesmere Port, (and/or Hooton), to Warrington Bank Quay with some extended to Wigan.

We hope you will give consideration to our suggestions and will be pleased to provide further information, on hearing from you.

CWG 10/09/2013

APPENDIX 1

