

Rail for Herefordshire

run by volunteers working for improvements to rail services

Response to the Consultation on the future of the Wales and Borders Rail Franchise

These comments refer to our experience of the Marches Line, especially with reference to Hereford and Leominster.

1. Whether the current franchise meets passenger needs and what lessons should be learnt

Rail usage continues to rise in Herefordshire as in other parts of Britain, and ATW regularly comes high up in league tables of performance and passenger satisfaction; our experience is indeed that trains are comfortable and that most are usually more or less on time. ATW staff are nearly always polite and helpful. However, against this must be set the fact that large numbers of people never, or hardly ever, use trains because of cost, overcrowding, inconvenience (e.g. not available when you want one), a bad experience – or a combination of these reasons. Relating these points to the local situation:

Cost: For Herefordians, the Marches line is notoriously expensive. For example an off-peak day return to Cardiff from Hereford currently costs £20.60, but one with London Midland to Birmingham, the same distance, costs £14.70. This obviously deters people from visiting Cardiff – not good news for shops and leisure destinations.

Related to this is the issue of split tickets being cheaper than direct tickets (e.g. a day return from Hereford to Llandrindod costs £29.60 but a day return (using the same trains) to Knucklas + a day return from Knucklas to Llandrindod costs £15.20 + £3.90 = £19.10). This sort of anomaly, which is widespread throughout the rail network, not just on ATW trains, brings rail travel into disrepute, as people feel cheated when they discover that someone else has been charged much less for the same journey and it reinforces the impression that train ticketing is too complex for the uninitiated to understand. It also makes difficulties for ticket office staff; if they tell passengers they could save money by buying two tickets instead of one they are being disloyal to their employer, but if they don't they are not helping customers as much as they could. We note that Transport Scotland has taken steps to reduce (though not eliminate completely) these anomalies; in the words of the Transport Minister: "We have always been clear on our commitment to getting more people on Scotland's trains and a major factor in that has been ensuring affordable and easily understood fare structures.....We want a fares system which is quick and easy to use and which provides the cheapest fare possible." If Scotland can sort this out, surely Wales could? We note the efforts made by ATW to encourage travel at less busy periods by the Club 55 promotion, which is understandably popular with people aged 55 or over, but we would like the offers to be more inclusive; London Midland, for example, make their comparable offers available to people of all ages. (Even Club 55 has been discontinued for Autumn 2013, regrettably.)

Overcrowding: We understand, of course, that overcrowding during rush hours is a problem everywhere and not easily eliminated. But trains are often overcrowded at other times, too. While this may be because of the terms of the franchise, which assumed no growth in usage, passengers (or potential passengers) simply see that trains are overcrowded – and note that other operators (such as London Midland and Chiltern) have tried, and been able, to address the problem.

Inconvenience: On the whole, the Marches line provides frequent, fast trains for people in Hereford and Leominster. The Heart of Wales line, however, seems to be sadly neglected. We understand that the franchise requires 4 trains a day in each direction, and presumably ATW would lose money by providing more. But the timing of the trains seems almost perverse - this isn't the place for a detailed discussion, but as an example, a first train of the day at 4.36 from Swansea and at 5.19 from Shrewsbury is hardly likely to attract many passengers.

One issue which deters people from using trains is poor connectivity between rail and bus travel. Two obvious examples are Abergavenny (where no buses call at the railway station) and Hereford (where some buses call at the

station but many don't, and even for those that do there is no co-ordination of rail and bus timetables). We realise that SEWTA and Herefordshire Council have good intentions for the development of these two stations respectively, but passengers and prospective passengers simply see that the situation at present is a shambles.

Connections, especially at Newport, are another problem area for users of the Marches line; the apparent inability of the train operating companies and Network Rail to solve this problem causes a range of reactions by travellers from resignation to rage.

Lessons to be learnt: The obvious lessons are that

(a) for trains to be run by a company aiming to maximise profits (which in the case of ATW go back to DB, presumably to subsidise German trains) is bound to be disadvantageous for passengers. Some sort of not-for-profit arrangement, whether or not a franchise, would seem to have huge potential benefits.

(b) the idea that a franchise-granting body can predict how/whether demand for train services is going to change over a period of 15 years is a delusion, to put it mildly. The franchise was granted as a 'do-nothing' franchise with regard to any service enhancements, so it's not surprising that ATW is reluctant to invest much, and presents anything it does invest as a great favour to the people of Wales and the Borders.

(c) The present system of franchising does little to promote a long term approach to public transport integration, or cooperation by train companies to make journeys as stress-free and convenient as possible.

2. How passengers should be involved in the franchise development and delivery

We certainly feel that passengers should be involved to introduce an element of reality into discussions (and to prevent all decisions being made by people who travel free), but 'rail users' tend to be very protective of their own patch, and it will be difficult to find objective people with enough knowledge and experience to be able to consider the overall picture. We support the suggestions for passenger involvement made by Paul Salveson in 'Rail Cymru, A people's railway for Wales', even if his detailed proposals are not adopted.

3. How communities and local government should be involved

Although we fully understand and sympathise with the Welsh Assembly's agenda for developing and improving rail services in Wales, we, not surprisingly, are anxious that the parts of England served by Welsh trains should not be regarded as inconvenient interruptions for passengers travelling from one part of Wales to another. As pointed out above, good connectivity between England and Wales is beneficial for both residents of Wales and of England. We ask that any plans for the development of the Marches Line should be 'border-blind' and simply consider the needs of all people in the region. We are thinking particularly of the improvement of the Newport-Abergavenny route which arguably should consider the Newport-Hereford route (or even Newport-Shrewsbury). Local authorities in the English parts of the Marches served by Welsh trains should certainly have an input.

4. Management model to be adopted

There seems to be almost universal agreement that the franchise system is extremely inefficient at meeting passengers' needs (see para. 1 above, for example) and its administration is also, of course, very costly both for the relevant government, whether Welsh or British, and for the train operating companies. In the end tax payers and passengers pay for this. Some sort of not-for-profit arrangement, whether or not a franchise, would seem to have huge potential benefits.

5. Routes to be included

It seems logical for the Marches line from Newport to Shrewsbury, and the current extensions to Manchester and Holyhead in the North (in addition, of course, to the routes from Newport to West Wales), to be included. We note the aspirations of SEWTA to have direct train services from the Marches line through to England via the Severn Tunnel, and see no reason why this route could not also be included.

6. Rolling Stock needed

We don't feel able to comment on this in detail, but there is clearly an urgent need for more rolling stock. The Marches line uses 175 Coradia units, which cannot apparently be combined with any other item of rolling stock and so often cannot be extended when a longer train is wanted; this situation is obviously very unsatisfactory when demand for rail travel is increasing, and the two carriage trains are often overcrowded now. We note that leasing is a major expense for train operating companies. In the long run, it would surely be a good investment for the Welsh Assembly to own the rolling stock.

7. Additional lines or stations

Everyone wants these, but at present we can't realistically argue for more lines between Herefordshire and Wales, or for more stations on the Marches line in Herefordshire.

8. Relationship with Network Rail

We are aware that many commentators have pointed out how cumbersome, inefficient and expensive the separation of infrastructure and train operation is, and that Network Rail's schemes (e.g. for new station construction) tend to be very expensive.