

[National Assembly for Wales](#)

[Enterprise and Business Committee](#)

[Inquiry into the future of the Wales and Borders Rail](#)

Evidence from Rob Phillips – WBF 35

The future of the Wales and Borders Rail Franchise

Thank you for the opportunity to make comments on the shape of the new Wales & Borders train operator's franchise. I am as a regular rail user and I am replying in a personal capacity.

The current franchise

The main lessons to draw from the current franchise is that the prediction for no growth in passenger numbers has left an unreasonable responsibility for investment in capacity improvements with the Welsh Government, while the train operator retains the revenue from the increased passenger loadings. The current operator has done well out of the set-up but it is not fair for the taxpayer and passenger.

Priorities for the future franchise

Any future franchise should build in an expected growth in passenger numbers, and require the train operator to cater for those increases. The operator should also be making a contribution to infrastructure improvements where they will bring increased revenue or reduce costs. For example, where platforms are extended to allow for longer trains to cope with increasing demand, the train operator as well as Network Rail and the Welsh Government should contribute towards the cost.

Where growth on services reaches certain levels, the operator should be responsible for providing additional carriages. The Aberystwyth service especially suffers from overcrowding because the specification for 2 carriage trains did not take growth into account.

There should be a mechanism in the franchise to allow for new or enhanced services without the cost falling on the Welsh Government. For example, if additional services are provided on a line, or a new line re-opened there should be a formula, agreed as part of the franchise to pay the cost of those services and the share the revenue. It cannot be fair for the train operator to have new infrastructure provided for it and then be paid a subsidy for a successful new service while it is able to retain all the income derived from it.

The train operator should either be more heavily regulated to ensure good service (i.e. that trains are clean, toilets are not overflowing, refreshments are provided, stations are maintained) or a company with that ethos should be in place. This is not the case at present. This would depend on the model of train operator adopted.

Standards could be more easily defined by designating services into four categories which would have easily identified characteristics.

- Inter-city – long distance train with first class, hot & cold refreshments, reserved seats, air-conditioning and wi-fi (for example Cardiff – Holyhead and Carmarthen – Manchester)
- Express – long distance train with trolley service, reserved seats, air-conditioning and wi-fi (for example Aberystwyth – Birmingham)
- Commuter – Short haul services with a minimum hourly frequency (Cardiff valleys)
- Local – Local services in rural area (Conwy Valley, Heart of Wales, Pembroke Dock)

At least Inter-city and Express services should have free wi-fi as standard.

Through ticketing and co-ordinated timetabling should be provided between rail services and key strategic bus services. Through ticketing to bus services has been promised for years and appears to have been launched but despite trying on many occasions I have not been able to purchase a combined rail and bus ticket from Lampeter. To build confidence in the connections, the same conditions of carriage should apply (i.e. that if a connection is missed because a train or bus is delayed the onward journey is guaranteed by taxi). These services should be seamless, carrying the same livery and be information available via the train company's website.

Similarly, smartcard tickets similar to London's Oyster system should be a requirement for both rail and connecting bus services. A Wales railcard should be introduced along the lines of the local railcards for residents along some lines.

In terms of rolling stock, there should be a rolling programme of upgrades and improvements, including adding additional carriages. This doesn't necessarily mean new trains as refurbished carriages can raise standards in a cost-effective way as has been the case with the refurbished Cambrian Line trains and the Inter-city service from Cardiff to Holyhead. In order to increase capacity and upgrade the service, trains of refurbished Inter-City carriages could be used on some additional Cardiff - Holyhead and Carmarthen - Manchester services. This would then release other carriages to provide more frequent or longer trains elsewhere. New or refurbished trains should have passenger input into their design, should have space for bicycles and luggage, air-conditioning, audio and visual displays, wi-fi, plug in points and seats should line up with windows.

The Welsh Government should consider purchasing rolling stock which can then be provided to the selected operator as part of the contract. This would save in the long term on leasing fees and allow the Welsh Government more control of the types of trains used. Purchasing older trains for refurbishment would be more cost effective, at least initially, in this case.

For improvements to individual services I would suggest the following

- Hourly service from Aberystwyth (some trains to run through to Cardiff)
- Upgrade some Cardiff – Holyhead and Carmarthen – Manchester trains to Inter–City standard.
- Additional hourly service between Carmarthen and Cardiff (possibly extending to Bristol) which would run avoiding Swansea to save 20–30 minutes from the journey time
- Extension of some of the Paddington – Cardiff services operated by FGW to Llanelli or Carmarthen avoiding Swansea.
- A new service between Newport and Ebbw Vale.
- Additional services between Swansea and Llandeilo.

Ticket machines should be provided at many more stations, especially where there is no ticket office. Tickets to the continent via Eurostar should continue to be available. Rail and sail connections to Ireland should be sustained (especially at Fishguard). Secure storage for bicycles should also be more widely available. Cafes or heated waiting rooms with minimum opening hours should be a requirement at main interchange stations.

Local authorities and user groups should be more involved with managing unstaffed stations. Where possible, innovative ways of providing staff at stations needs to be found, through partnering with local businesses or other bodies. There may be a case for community groups to take on “staffing” of stations through running cafes, information centres etc.

I believe that there is demand for new or re–opened services, especially in the south of Wales. Routes which should be considered are;

- Newport – Machen – Caerphilly
- Aberdare – Hirwaun
- Ystrad Mynach – Bedlinog
- Neath – Aberpergwm – Hirwaun
- Neath – Onllwyn
- Bangor – Llangefni

I believe that the current cross border services which are part of the franchise should remain as they form a significant part of the core network. There is a case to transfer some of the Paddington – Cardiff – Swansea services to the new franchise to enable Welsh Government oversight and extensions of the service further west. There may be scope to add some Holyhead and Aberystwyth to London services.

I think the Welsh Government's proposal for a not for dividend operator is a step in the right direction. The current operator is geared towards maximising profit by adhering to minimum standards and this culture needs to change. I would suggest that the new operator should also have a significant element of passenger oversight as well as local authority involvement. This could be achieved by forming a company limited by guarantee. The Welsh Government, the rail unions, local authorities and user groups could all be corporate members. Individual passengers could join by purchasing a residents railcard. I can think of no stronger incentive for managers to operate a good service than if passengers have a vote at the AGM. User groups and local authorities should be involved in specifying the franchise requirements as they will have valuable input and should be working to co-ordinate local bus services.

Given the importance of branding and seamless linking between train and key bus services and the amount of financial support provided to the train operator, there should be a common brand which remains constant irrespective of who holds the contract. There will be longer term savings as trains and stations will not need to be re-painted each time the contract changes.

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this consultation.