



Chester-Shrewsbury Rail Partnership Response to the NAFW inquiry into the Wales & Borders Franchise

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

The Wales & Borders franchise was let in 2003 on a no growth basis. It was evident even at that time that the demand for rail travel across the country was increasing, yet an outdated Public Service Requirement (PSR) was the basis for the services that should be delivered. This initial flaw in the letting of the franchise has caused rail expansion and demand in Wales & the Borders to be constrained by lack of capacity both in infrastructure and rolling stock. It did not look to how lifestyles had changed and would continue to change with out 24/7, 365 days of week culture.

The area covered is complex, as are the travel patterns. The new Wales & Borders franchise encompassed many individual rail companies and the demand for east west travel was not appreciated. The franchise specification also showed little understanding and no provision for increase in passenger demand.

Unlike other franchises there was no obligation to support financially and work with Community Rail Partnership. Community Rail in Wales and the Borders is the direct link to the local communities and their understanding of passenger needs and the ability to deliver should be harnessed and developed.

Future franchises should:

- Have a detailed understanding of travel patterns
- Look for where demand is likely to be over the next franchise period
- Estimate the potential benefits for increasing services where a business case may be found
- Ensure the network infrastructure is capable of managing that demand
- Ensure provision is made for sufficient rolling stock to be available
- Look at transport as a whole not rail is a separate entity
- Avoid ad hoc enhancements to services, including that of any premier service, should demonstrate a business case and be value for money.
- An obligation both in partnership working and financial support to community rail partnerships

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

Passengers have to be the number one priority or why else run a railway?

Railways being run for the convenience of the railway fail to understand the value the railway brings to communities, the economy and to the well being of its inhabitants.

Similarly Government strategies that do not see the greater benefits also fail to deliver a railway for the people. A change in political leadership that sees emphasis shift is detrimental to the railway; we need a long term vision that we work to whatever the political persuasion at that time. There are many ways of engaging with passengers but as well as a overarching rail / transport strategy we need to keep a close eye on how these impact on local travel and its expansion. Consistent engagement through rail user groups and community rail partnerships which are usually line based will give a better picture of the real situation that emerges.

We would suggest:

- Passenger needs should be identified both for rail services and for station enhancements.
- Any changes to the timetables should be through engagement and agreement, not done centrally without discussion. It needs a true understanding of what impact change brings both nationally and locally.
- Analysis of passenger demand and the destinations people wish to go to.
- An appreciation that the passenger is the number one priority.

**3. How communities and local government / Regional Transport Consortia should be involved.
Could they be involved in specifying the franchise or perhaps even in delivering services?**

Local needs can sometimes be overlooked by the quest for a national targets or strategy to be delivered.

Engagement with local bodies to understand their needs and how they can be delivered is essential. Without that we will have 'experts' deciding centrally what's best.

We have the opportunity to provide the people with a truly focused people's railway. There are opportunities to do things differently and starting as we are with a blank canvas we need look beyond what is currently delivered and how it is implemented.

We would suggest:

- A joint approach establishing line of route plans through engagement with local residents, local authorities, rail user groups and the community rail partnerships.
- These plans would show minimum requirements both for services and stations in that area or line of route.
- Enhancements should be prioritised on a needs basis, locally.
- Rather than take staff from stations consider the Gobowen model for staffing stations as independent rail agencies.
- If a business case for providing that service or facility is not apparent consider the possibility to provide the enhancement through volunteers or 3rd party operation.

4. The management model to be adopted, including the Welsh Government's proposal for a not-for-dividend franchise;

Railways are big business and the complexities of running such an operation should not be forgotten. However not for dividend companies do exist and do attract the expertise needed for successful operation. We would support the proposal for a not for dividend/cooperative style company similar to Dwr Cymru. Such a company could deliver the following benefits:

- Any profits can be invested straight back into the company and not to shareholders.
- It would be committed to delivering the best railway to Wales & the Borders.
- It would seek to involve the views of its employees and passengers in delivering the operation.

5. How the franchise specification should improve the passenger experience, including issues such as franchise length, targets / incentives and the core service standards which should be included;

Franchise length rather depends on what model the management of that franchise will follow. A prescriptive franchise that allows for no alteration will never meet future needs. If it is accepted that Wales will look to operate a not for dividend company some private sector disciplines will need to be introduced to ensure its viability. What should be aspired to is a railway that delivers benefits to the people of Wales & the Borders that become a flagship for excellence.

- Core services should be established locally and be sustainable
- Bus/Rail should integrate and be a seamless journey
- Connectivity and connections for onward journeys should be improved and the adverse impact poor connections can have on people's decision to travel by rail analysed.
- When disruption occurs the passenger should be the priority not the impact it has on train running.
- More meaningful statistics, we need to know the impact late running can have not just how many trains arrived within a set period. Trains that do not make their connections make great difficulties for the passengers and the problems need addressing.
- Delivering services to where people want to go and at times they wish to travel. Currently late evening and Sunday service schedules preclude many from travelling by train.
- The Marches region in England needs to be represented as a 5th transport consortia in all discussions. Passengers from this region currently have no input into any forward planning or service changes.

6. The routes, particularly cross-border routes, which should be included;

Rail devolution both in the North and in the West Midlands may impact on the final franchise map and we should be aware of their development and the impact this may have on the travel needs of the passengers.

We would suggest:

- The Wales & Borders Franchise needs to recognise the needs of the English Border Counties passengers if included in the franchise area.
- Also the need to travel to airports means a journey to the North West (Manchester & Liverpool) or the West Midlands for many. Direct trains running to these airports should be protected to ensure we are not disadvantaged in our travel needs.

7. The rolling stock needed for the new franchise. What factors need to be considered and how this should be procured? Will new rolling stock be required?

The Wales & Borders franchise is currently constrained by its lack of rolling stock with units currently being allocated to maximum effect. Problems arise when there are breakdowns or disruptions and no extra stock is available.

Rolling stock is expensive and the leasing structure allows very little freedom of choice. If bespoke rolling stock was to be ordered it should be fit for purpose and designed to match the needs of the market and passengers as much as possible.

Consideration should be given to:

- Procurement of bespoke rolling stock fit for the nature of the routes they serve, including possibility of adequate cycle and luggage storage.
- Look at alternatives to the current leasing system.

8. Whether additional lines, enhancements to existing lines, new stations or other infrastructure are needed

As the demand for rail continues so will the pressure for more stations to be opened and more lines introduced. However any enhancements, whether it be infrastructure, stations or additional lines need to demonstrate that they will generate more passengers not abstract those already using the railway, be sustainable and add to the local economy. Schemes should show a network benefit and not be solely politically driven.

9. Whether the franchise can support an enhanced relationship between Network Rail and the franchise operator and the benefits this might bring.

Any improvement in relationships can only be a good thing but what there should be is far more openness throughout the structure. There is a long list of interested parties that need to be communicated with, each bringing a unique view which can benefit the final product if managed carefully. For too long statistics on the railway and budgetary matters have been guarded secrets. We really do need to know what our railway costs in order to plan long term. Improving relationships between all parties from the WG to the passenger and all those in between will be a real challenge.

ENDS

Sheila Dee 12th September 2013