National Assembly for Wales

Enterprise and Business Committee

Inquiry into the future of the Wales and Borders Rail

Evidence from Welsh Local Government Association – WBF 8 1

Future of the Wales & Borders Rail Franchise

September 2013

INTRODUCTION

1. The Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) represents the 22 local authorities in Wales and the three national park authorities and three fire and rescue authorities are associate members.

2. It seeks to provide representation to local authorities within an emerging policy framework that satisfies the key priorities of our members and delivers a broad range of services that add value to Welsh Local Government and the communities they serve.

What lessons can be learnt from the current franchise?

3. Currently there is a good level of engagement with the current franchise operator which 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.

4. Local authorities and Regional Transport Consortia together with the current franchise operator have made notable improvements in the rail network across Wales through the delivery of station improvements, car parking, opening of new lines and new stations. This positive relationship should be continued into the new franchise to ensure that Regional Transport Consortia can continue to attract additional resources and improvements to the rail network.

5. 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. Although the current operator has done well to adhere to the requirements of the franchise little progress has been made to improve services offered over the term as this improvement has not being a feature of the current franchise model. In part this is a due to how the current franchise was developed; low growth was forecast which did not take into account alternative growth scenarios. The future franchise should be based on more robust forecasting, have room to grow and change and be closely aligned to the overall social, economic and environmental policies pursued by Welsh Government and local government.

6. Careful consideration over the length of the franchise is needed. A longer franchise would allow a franchisee to make 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. However, there must be a mechanism for the removal of a poorly performing operator with review dates and break points agreed as part of the franchise.

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

7. The most common complaint in respect of current services is levelled at 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. The frequency and reliability of the current franchise is largely reported to be of an acceptable standard. The new franchise operator should be required to improve 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 to limit overcrowding.

8. Improvements to the rolling stock should 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.

9. The Wales & Borders franchise could 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. This is a market that could be greatly expanded.

10. The future franchise should give consideration to accessibility issues and consider how to reduce the barriers to rail travel cited by many disabled rail users. These include a lack of accessible and up to date passenger information, public and staff attitudes and inaccessible trains.

11. Improved mechanisms for receiving and acting on passenger feedback should be a feature of the new performance measurement regime associated with the new

franchise. Passengers should be consulted on the next franchise; they are less likely to be concerned with the operating model but would offer valid views regarding operational issues such as frequency, over crowding, ticket price and reliability.

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

12. In 2018 the electrification of the south Wales mainline will be completed and this alongside the new franchise and regional economic initiatives such as City Regions and the South East Wales Metro provides an opportunity for innovative thinking about the best way to take advantages of the quicker, quieter and faster electric trains and the potential re-configuration of the franchise.

13. There is an opportunity with the new franchise to make steps towards an integrated public transport system featuring fully integrated ticketing, appropriate co-ordination of timetables and passenger information.

14. The WLGA is aware that alternative franchise models may be considered. The WLGA would not welcome the introduction of any alternative franchise model where reliability and/or frequencies are not assured to improve 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.

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