

[National Assembly for Wales](#)

[Enterprise and Business Committee](#)

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

Evidence from Association of Community Rail Partnerships – WBF 8 5

Memorandum to Enterprise and Business Committee

Association of Community Rail Partnerships

The Future of the Wales and Borders Rail Franchise

ACoRP

1. ACoRP is the body representing community rail partnerships (CRPs) and station support groups throughout Great Britain. It has 39 CRP members covering 73 lines and 122 station support groups. It provides training and supports research into the potential and benefits of applying community rail principles, disseminates good practice and manages grant schemes which provide encouragement and support for community projects that bring benefits to the lines concerned. It also monitors the passenger numbers of community rail lines with the cooperation of ATOC, to identify trends and the benefits flowing from initiatives promoted by CRPs.
2. In Wales, ACoRP is sponsored by Welsh Assembly Government and represents seven CRPs within the area served by the Wales & Borders franchise together with the Chirk station friends group.
3. In this submission, we only address the issues relating to the new franchise that are relevant to the community rail movement.
4. Community Rail development has been very successful in increasing the number of passengers using the local lines, and the growth on community rail lines has been on average higher than other local rail services. They have also been successful in engaging with the communities they serve. Research carried out for ACoRP indicated that some 4,000 volunteers throughout Britain contributed 1.2m hours of work annually with a value estimated at £27m. Projects on community rail lines also have a high value, typically having a benefit to cost ratio of 4.6:1. Innovative projects have also helped to reduce costs. For example, the “Aberdovey Hump” (a simple way of reducing the

stepping distance at stations with low platforms), has improved accessibility at around one tenth of the cost of raising the platform height by conventional means. Apart from the direct transport benefits, CRPs also help agencies such as Visit Wales deliver on their objectives, and help deal with the transport issues resulting from the concentration of health care or education on larger central units.

Principles relating to Community Rail Development

5. We believe it is essential that a new Wales and Borders franchise should build on the value of CRPs and seek to extend them, particularly to lines in West Wales. We are grateful for the continued support for ACoRP by Welsh Assembly Government and would wish to develop further the productive relationship established. We would strongly recommend that local authorities and transport partnerships should continue to support CRPs and that it should be a franchise obligation for the new train operator.
6. In our experience, the relationship with the existing franchise operator has been good, even though there is currently no obligation in the franchise agreement to support CRPs. However, the very success of community rail in Wales did lead at one stage to the operator cutting the level of support provided, given that the trains provided on the current service were already full. We believe it is important to avoid this in future and that the latent rail passenger demand should not be constrained by the limitations of the service. We also believe that community rail development can provide the key to innovative solutions to meeting rising demand. As a result of this experience we would recommend that support for CRPs should be a franchise commitment for the future.
7. Meeting future growth in demand should be one of the priorities for the new franchise, particularly on community rail lines. We believe more can be done to improve connectivity and improve value for money for passengers, but it is clearly difficult to reconcile this with a parallel objective of reducing payment by the taxpayer, at least in the short term. Most community rail lines are run with minimal resources and the scope to reduce costs further is limited. However, the experience of community rail development is that ridership has increased dramatically, while costs have remained broadly constant, so that passenger miles per pound of support has improved significantly, bring better value to the taxpayer.
8. Looking specifically at the issues raised by the Committee:

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

The existing franchise was let on a 'steady state' basis, but experience has shown significant growth, constrained on some routes and at times by limited capacity. It is important that the new franchise recognises the inevitability of continuing future growth in demand, and includes mechanisms to allow this to be addressed by the provision of additional capacity. This is particularly true of community rail lines where growth is actively driven by the partnership.

- b) How passengers should be involved in the franchise development and delivery.

CRPs are the ideal vehicle to ensure that future plans meet local needs, as the partnerships are rooted in the community and are able to provide the sort of local information that will ensure that service planning fits patterns of demand more closely. The role of Passenger Focus is also important here, and will be particularly valuable on routes without a CRP.

- c) 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?

It is important that local government and RTCs are closely involved in the development of the franchise, along with CRPs. In our experience, some flexibility has to be left to operators to use their technical skills to do the detailed development of the timetable and resource deployment which drives the rolling stock and train crew requirement, and so a large element of the cost of the franchise. At this stage there has to be close cooperation between the CRP/local authority and the operator to balance the pattern of demand with the cost of service provision to get the best result. CRPs can provide some services directly, and there are examples where ACoRP members provide support activities, such as platform gritting in frosty weather, station staffing, ticket selling or station cleaning.

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

Whatever model is adopted, it is important that it is structured to work with CRPs and that the franchise terms are sufficiently flexible to allow a separate management unit for community rail lines to be created if required. This might facilitate a different approach to running a local line, or encouraging the development of community based innovative service enhancement schemes of the kind proposed for the Heart of Wales line.

- e) 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:

We believe that it is important that the length of the franchise should be sufficient to give time for the operator to develop relationships with stakeholder groups and to establish joint ventures to improve the passenger experience with new services or upgraded stations. It is also important that it is structured to avoid the 'dead' period towards the end of the franchise, where an operator is unwilling to commit to further investment or development because the payback period is too short. In our view, this implies a minimum of ten years, and a longer period could also work, providing there are quinquennial reviews to allow a review in the light of performance and also for the terms to be updated to reflect changing circumstances and further growth.

- f) The routes, particularly cross-border routes, which should be included.

We believe strongly that services should be shaped around passenger demand rather than around political boundaries. This implies continuation of cross border services where demand lines are strong, for example between mid Wales and the West Midlands.

- g) 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?

Rolling stock is a major expense and typically represents around 15% of a franchisee's costs. The overriding need is to secure more trains to increase capacity, although it is also recognised that some of those in use (such as class 153 units on the Heart of Wales line) are not ideal for the purpose.

- h) Whether additional lines, enhancements to existing lines, new stations or other infrastructure are needed:

Community Rail Development focuses on making the most of existing lines, rather than promoting new ones, although there is no doubt that some new lines could form the basis of successful CRPs and community rail principles could help to make new lines both more affordable and successful. New stations can be specified and delivered through the franchise agreement, as can infrastructure enhancement (such as track doubling), but for practical reasons, it may be better for new lines to be handled separately. This is because new lines require a Transport and Works Act Order with an unpredictable timescale, and are usually best promoted by Network Rail.

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

We believe that alliancing has the potential to bring many benefits in a more coherent approach to operating the railway as a seamless service for passengers. It would benefit CRPs which invariably adopt an integrated approach to resolving problems or developing projects for their lines.