

Cynulliad Cenedlaethol Cymru	National Assembly for Wales
Y Pwyllgor Menter a Busnes	Enterprise and Business Committee
Ymchwiliad i'r Blaenoriaethau ar gyfer dyfodol Seilwaith y Rheilffyrdd yng Nghymru	Inquiry into the Priorities for the future of Welsh Rail Infrastructure
WRI 07	WRI 07
Fforwm rheilffordd Calon Cymru	Heart of Wales Line Forum

THE HEART OF WALES LINE FORUM



1. Introduction

.1 The Heart of Wales Line Forum is the Community Rail Partnership covering the route between Swansea and Shrewsbury via Llandrindod Wells. The current infrastructure provider Network Rail is an active Forum member but for reasons of impartiality has not been asked to contribute to this response.

.2 The consultative document asks for responses on nine or so matters. To some extent these overlap. They are also posed at quite a high level: in contrast the Forum's normal work is focussed on day to day and local matters, though we do of course recognise the need for long term strategic planning.

.3 These responses will therefore focus on how the Forum has experienced the planning and delivery of rail infrastructure issues to date, and ways in which we propose the current modus operandum needs to be improved. We also need to comment that while your terms of reference specify that you are examining infrastructure, other assets such as staff and rolling stock are ignored at our peril.

2. High Level Priorities

.1 The Forum believes that rail has the opportunity to significantly contribute to social and economic wellbeing by enhancing connectivity within Wales and by linking our country with the rest of the UK and beyond. Our own route is 'international', with a significant proportion of mileage in England. It is also predominantly rural, even though it starts and finishes in large conurbations. We are concerned that the current strategic planning process is unduly biased toward the needs of conurbations and that rural routes are not sufficiently taken into account. This will be particularly relevant over the next few years, with much emphasis and use of – always limited - resources being focussed on the South Wales electrification and the Cardiff Metro.

.2 We also comment that, during the imminent franchising and route mapping process, a joined-up approach needs to be adopted. The English – Welsh border is of course politically important but passengers plan their journeys using other criteria, and the use and development of infrastructure needs to reflect their needs.

Developments in England such as the proposed HS2 'hub' at Crewe need to be taken into account when developing infrastructure in Wales so that we can maximise opportunities and benefits.

3. WG infrastructure priorities, National Transport Finance Plan, Ministerial Task Force

.1 The needs of rural mid and South West Wales do not figure significantly in any of the above. The whole area is in decline, as it has been for many years. Transport is vital to regeneration but as things stand it is not only proving extremely hard (though not totally impossible) to gain support for significant enhancements that make use of a line such as ours more attractive either for local people, the outside visitors that have the potential to bring in much needed income, or businesses who might be induced to set up in the area.

.2 The 30 year NR Wales Route planning process, while of course necessary, cuts little ice with a passenger on one of our deeply rural stations, at night, in the rain and with no mobile signal, confronted with an information screen indicating that the last train that day has been cancelled. Infrastructure needs are not confined to rails and signals but also need to support passenger information, comfort and security needs. Currently they do not, and plans to ameliorate these infrastructure issues are limited at best.

.3 We live in the 21st century. The UK is one of the richest countries in the world. Our citizens – even outside the cities – are encouraged to expect high quality up to date services. Arguably, the quality of the rural rail transport service in Wales is significantly worse than it was before the second World War. In its own small way, the Forum, through the embryonic Heart of Wales Line Enterprise Network, is trying to turn the tide by establishing rail based community ‘hubs’. We would be heartened if the process of infrastructure planning were to provide support for our efforts, and in the relatively near future. To date, the implementation of community based schemes has been a struggle, because of the Byzantine nature of the way in which infrastructure is managed and delivered.

4. The impact of England on Wales and vice versa: wider devolution of responsibility for rail within England etc.

.1 As already rehearsed, passenger needs and rail routes do not respect boundaries. However, rail schemes need to be funded. This means accessing public money, and the need to ensure that different political administrations are able to work together to agree on priorities and the use of resources. To date, this process has not been conspicuously successful. It needs to be made more effective. Whatever happened to the Cross Border Memorandum of Understanding.....?

.2 High Speed Rail (both HS2 and S Wales electrification) are infrastructure projects largely being led by bodies from outside Wales. We need a planning process in place to ensure that we are able to benefit from the benefits they are intended to deliver.

.3 One particular aspect of rail devolution being taken forward by the Department for Transport is the development of Community Business Units. The intention is to maximise the benefits of rail at a community level by encouraging close links with local enterprises and initiatives. Welsh Government is also supportive of the concept and on the Heart of Wales line we already have such an initiative in place in the form of the very popular station cafe at Llandovery – a ‘station hub’. We have more such initiatives in the pipeline and recommend that further support be provided for the necessary infrastructure (especially buildings) that this will require, on our route and elsewhere.

5. WG engagement on infrastructure developments in England etc

As well as the need for Cross Border collaboration already mentioned there is a need to ensure that all other relevant route studies (West Midlands, access to Crewe and the North, HS2, and routes to Ireland) are monitored and the Welsh perspective made clear. This is not the sort of work that the

Forum would expect to engage with and it may well be that it is in hand: if not then plans should be made.

6. Does the periodic review process meet the needs of Wales?

From the perspective of the rural rail user in mid and South West Wales, palpably not.

Poor station facilities, trains with low speeds because of unimproved routes (speed restrictions, driver operated level crossings), a signalling system that frequently breaks down, excessive waiting times at passing loops (of which there are too few), poor connections and thus long waits at junctions. These are our lot, and have been for many years. All of the above are principally related to infrastructure. Add the lack of available rolling stock and thus a very sparse timetable and it's a wonder that we have as many passengers as we do.....

This is not a plea for more trains for the sake of it. The Forum is regularly made aware of suppressed demand which, if satisfied, would unlock many social, health and economic benefits. The periodic review process has so far failed to deliver, for us.

7. The effectiveness of NR Wales Route

Forum dealings with NR are of three kinds. (i) We respond to their consultations, (ii) are affected by the way in which they conduct their affairs, and (iii) have dealings with their Community Rail staff.

- (i) The consultations are no doubt necessary. Railways are long term assets and a lengthy perspective needs to be taken. We have no quibble with their readiness to listen to our comments. However to date it is hard to identify any beneficial outcome for us. This was even the case with their consultation on community rail, tram trains etc.
- (ii) On a day to day basis, NR staff are courteous in their dealings with us, and clearly try to be helpful. However they appear to be prisoners of their own very complicated and slow processes and standards, which are unsuited to low tech, low traffic rural routes. It is sometimes possible to circumvent matters by appealing to senior management who are able to sanction action or offer a one off derogation on a particular matter. However this is time consuming and expensive for all parties and a better way of working needs to be found.

Some years ago the Strategic Rail Authority (SRA) made a brave attempt at doing this by starting to agree derogations to NR Group Standards for rural routes such as ours. Progress was made but before the initiative could be fully developed the SRA was abolished.

The Committee will be aware that a major review of NR is currently being undertaken and it is to be hoped that this will result in a more efficient and responsive organisation.

Examples of the sorts of project with which we continue to struggle include the installation of a small prefabricated building on NR land, the provision of lineside information signs, the removal of excessive lineside vegetation, and the current impossibility of running trains on our route before 11.00 on a Sunday. Details of the above can be provided if needed.

It is worth noting that the NR adherence to processes and procedures did not protect them from omitting to apply for a safety operating licence for our line in due time last year. As a result, for a few days no trains were allowed to run at over 30mph on the route.

- (iii) Our dealings with NR Community Rail staff have been helpful and positive. An internal change of NR policy two years or so ago meant that their existing well established Community Rail unit was abolished. Wales Route has now set up its own arrangements, with new staff. Useful previous experience was lost in the change, but we need to praise the efforts being made by those with whom we now deal, who are working hard to help us, within the constraints set out above.

Finally, we believe that there is considerable scope for infrastructure matters on lines such as ours to be made simpler and with a greater local focus. NR has agreed to examine such ideas with us but as yet no progress has been made.

8. Devolving rail infrastructure funding to Wales

With devolution of funding would need to come the power to plan and prioritise. As set out above, the Forum sees scope for such a move to be made at a more local level. However even then there would be the need to take account of the bigger picture (regional, national, etc).

It is hard to see how the matter can be disentangled from the associated issues of political power and of funding. If such a miracle can be achieved, clearly Wales, its communities and passengers would be able to maximise the potential of infrastructure improvements.

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Line Development Officer

On behalf of Forum Chairman **Cllr Paul Lloyd.**

January 12th 2016

RESPONSE ENDS