

Petition: Don't take Neath off the main railway line.

Y Pwyllgor Deisebau | 19 Mehefin 2018

Petitions Committee | 19 June 2018

Research Briefing:

Petition number: P-05-820

Petition title: Don't take Neath off the main railway line.

Text of petition:

Dear Government Minister(s), I draw your attention to the recent news that suggests that Neath will be taken off the main railway line from Swansea to London Paddington. I am not in favour of this decision because I believe that taking Neath off the main line would have a detrimental effect to the economy and re-generation of our town. The station is already run-down and a hub for anti-social behaviour. Taking Neath off the main line would only worsen these problems. It would also have a negative impact on those who commute on the main-line to work, meaning they would have to take an extra connection to Swansea, Baglan or Port Talbot first. Recent figures via research conducted by Plaid Cymru Councillor for Neath South Jamie Evans has found that: Around 830,000 passengers used Neath train station a year, making it the second busiest station, behind Swansea in the historic county of West Glamorgan and busiest of the five stations in Neath Port Talbot. The plans to remove Neath from the main line would mean commuters travelling to Cardiff from Neath would have to first catch a train to Swansea, Baglan or Port Talbot, meaning an increase in both cost and time taken to get to and from work. People from Neath, Pontardawe, Skewen, Glynneath and the Dulais Valley would see no benefit at all from the "10 minutes" saved on a journey between Swansea and Cardiff. I would gratefully ask you to re-consider this decision.

Background

The funding and operation of rail services and infrastructure in Wales is a complex picture. While control over the franchising of rail services in Wales has recently been devolved by the *Welsh Ministers (Transfer of Functions) (Railways) Order 2018*, control over rail infrastructure currently still sits with the UK Government.

Rail services

Passenger rail services in the UK are operated through franchise agreements, with the current agreement for the Wales and Borders Franchise coming to an end in October 2018. The [order devolving franchising powers](#) was made in May 2018 and the Welsh Government [awarded the next rail franchise to KeolisAmey on 23 May 2018](#), with further details of the contract provided to [Plenary on 4 June 2018](#).

Rail infrastructure

In contrast to rail services, responsibility for rail infrastructure still sits with the UK Government. Unlike Scotland, rail infrastructure funding in Wales is a reserved matter and while the Welsh Ministers have powers to invest in infrastructure, Wales receives no Block Grant allocation for this.

Rail industry planning in Britain takes place in five year control periods. Before each period starts the Secretary of State for Transport publishes two statutory statements for England and Wales: a High Level Output Specification (HLOS) which sets out what the UK Government expects the rail industry to deliver within the 5 year control period; and a Statement of Funds Available (SOFA).

On 20 July 2017 the Secretary of State published the [HLOS](#) for the next control period (2019–2024). Unlike the HLOS's for previous control periods, the statement focused on the operation, maintenance and renewal of existing railways but did not commit to any major new projects. This is because the way rail enhancement projects are planned by the UK Government is changing to a new '[pipeline approach](#)'.

At the same time as the HLOS was published, it emerged through media reports that the Secretary of State had decided to [cancel Great Western Mainline electrification between Cardiff and Swansea](#).

The Secretary of State also issued a [press release](#) outlining areas where he had asked Network Rail to develop enhancement options for Welsh rail. This included “improving journey times and connections between Swansea and Cardiff, and South Wales, Bristol and London”, as well as “station improvements in and around Swansea including looking at the case for additional provision.”

Rail infrastructure options for Swansea Bay region

In response to the cancellation of electrification between Cardiff and Swansea, and to the Secretary of State's announcement, the Welsh Government is developing its own rail infrastructure proposals for North and South Wales to put forward to the UK Government.

When making [a statement in Plenary on 8 May 2018](#) on the Welsh Government's "Ambitions for the Great Western and North Wales Main Lines" the Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Transport, Ken Skates, stated:

We rely on the UK Government to provide funding for enhancements to rail networks in Wales, but we cannot stand in the margins complaining; we need to set out our expectations for the network and be clear about the anticipated social and economic benefits.

The Cabinet Secretary stated that he has asked Professor Mark Barry to work with Welsh Government and Transport for Wales to develop two proposals, one case for North Wales and another for South Wales. The Cabinet Secretary went on to say:

This work will inform the individual scheme strategic outline business cases currently being developed by Transport Wales and the Department for Transport, and the purpose of these programme business cases is to establish the need for investment and to articulate high-level outcomes.

Professor Barry was previously responsible for developing the [South Wales Metro Impact Study](#) (PDF,9.2MB) and joined the Welsh Government to work on the project's development before moving to Cardiff University.

Professor Barry's proposals for South Wales involve creating a similar metro scheme in the Swansea Bay region. [Media coverage](#) has indicated that one of the options being considered by Professor Barry includes routing the main line from Port Talbot straight to Swansea and therefore removing Neath from the main line. Professor Barry suggests this would achieve the aim of reducing journey times between Swansea and Cardiff without the need for electrification.

Reports in the media show that there has been a mostly negative [response to the proposal from the public in Neath](#) and the Leader of Neath Port Talbot Council has publically stated that [the local authority would not support any proposal to remove the station from the main line](#).

Welsh Government Action and National Assembly for Wales Action

The Welsh Government's position on this was raised in [Plenary on 8 May 2018](#). The Cabinet Secretary was asked about the issue when making a statement on "Ambitions for the Great Western and North Wales Main Lines". Adam Price AM asked the Cabinet Secretary to:

say clearly whether or not you are ruling out any proposal that would remove Neath from the Great Western main line? Your Counsel General said that he would not support any proposal that included this. He is ruling this idea out. Can you say whether you are ruling this out at this stage, given that it was actually Professor Barry's idea?

The Cabinet Secretary responded:

I can confirm that our position is still that we are not looking at any reductions in services into Wales, or any reductions in station accessibility, and we'll be working with the UK Government and with Network Rail to that end. That includes Neath station.

Now, if we look at how you can improve journey times whilst maintaining stations such as Neath on the main line, you can first of all look at station improvements...so, before you even look at the major components of rail infrastructure, you should first look at signalling, points and crossings, in order to improve the speed at which trains can travel. That would reduce journey times ... before any consideration would need to be given to the actual track or stations. So, I can say we're not looking at any reductions. We don't just wish to protect stations and services and the provision of services to stations in Wales; we wish to see them enhanced, and that includes to Neath station.”

The Cabinet Secretary’s letter to the Chair of the Petitions Committee states that:

There is a long list of options for improving journey times by rail for commuters and long-distance travellers in South Wales and we will be working with stakeholders to identify what these are so we can make the best possible case to the UK Government for funding these much-needed improvements.

The Cabinet Secretary’s letter makes clear that the proposal to remove Neath station from the main line is just one of Professor Barry’s suggestions and that this particular proposal is “not supported by the Welsh Government.” The letter goes on to highlight that the Welsh Government:

appreciate the importance of well-serviced rail stations to their communities and have been very clear in our position on Neath station, and indeed, many other stations in the area. We believe these stations shouldn't just be protected but enhanced.

Every effort is made to ensure that the information contained in this briefing is correct at the time of publication. Readers should be aware that these briefings are not necessarily updated or otherwise amended to reflect subsequent changes.