

Petition: Reverse the cuts to commuter train services in North East Wales

Y Pwyllgor Deisebau | 10 Mawrth 2020
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Research Briefing:

Petition Number: P-05-944

Petition title: Reverse the cuts to commuter train services in North East Wales

Text of petition:

In recent years commuters along the North Wales Coast have seen a reduction in rush hour train services despite paying some of the highest train fares (when measured per mile) in the UK.

These cuts to services have already resulted in a reduction in the numbers of passengers using North East Wales railway stations as more and more commuters are forced to drive adding to congestion on the A55.

Transport for Wales now plan to cut the only direct evening rush-hour rail service between Bangor and Colwyn Bay, Rhyl, Prestatyn and Flint, the 17:16 service from Bangor. This will force commuters to change trains at Llandudno Junction, where they will have to wait over an hour for a connection.

The cancellation of this train service goes totally against Welsh Government policy in a number of respects:

- 1) It will result in increased greenhouse gas emissions by forcing people from public transport into their cars, at a time of a "climate emergency".
- 2) It will deny access to Bangor University by those living in some of Wales' most deprived communities.

We therefore call on the Assembly to force a rethink on TfW and to ensure the rail service in North Wales is sufficiently frequent and affordable to encourage commuters off the roads and onto the trains.

Background

In the summer of 2018 the Welsh Government awarded a 15 year contract to deliver the Wales and Borders rail franchise to KeolisAmey, trading as TfWRailServices. The franchise is managed on the Welsh Government's behalf by its transport delivery body, Transport for Wales (TfW). TfWRailServices began to operate Wales and Borders rail services in October 2018.

[National Rail timetable changes in Britain](#) take place twice yearly in May and December of each year. The most recent timetable change took effect on Sunday 15 December 2019. The [TfWRail website includes details](#) of the December 2019 timetable changes made by the operator. This identifies Cardiff to Holyhead services as being among the “most significantly affected”. In terms of “changes to train times”, the website includes the following information:

Why have services between Cardiff to Holyhead been affected so much by this timetable change?

As well as the need to accommodate the retiming of the South Wales to London services, we have also had to amend the timetable for this route because in early 2020 the current “Gerald” loco-hauled train and carriages will be operated on additional services along this route. This train has different operational requirements and cannot stop at all the stations along this route where platforms are too short. This has resulted in different calling patterns for certain services along this route. We also have a contractual requirement to offer faster services between North and South Wales.

Why is there now a longer waiting time for my connecting service?

Our timetable planners have worked their hardest to keep service connections where possible. However, there will still be some instances where services may no longer inter-connect seamlessly especially as other train operators' train times are changing too.

Changes were made to the Holyhead to Cardiff services to prepare for the introduction of Mark 4 Loco Hauled Trains when they enter service. The 17.16 service south from Bangor was retimed and stops removed. Where the 17.16 service from Bangor had called at Llandudno Junction, Colwyn Bay, Rhyl, Prestatyn and Flint before Chester. It has now been replaced by a 17.18 service calling at Llandudno Junction only, and then Chester.

Welsh Government action

The 13 February 2020 letter from the Minister for Economy, Transport and North Wales to the Chair responding to this petition summarises the Welsh Government's position. The Minister says that both he and TfW “acknowledge” that the December timetable change which introduced the express north-south Wales route “has raised concerns amongst commuting passengers”. He indicates that “developing timetables is incredibly challenging” and that there are “a number of factors” to be considered to allow for the “much needed express route”.

The Minister continues:

TfW had a commitment to introduce faster Cardiff–Holyhead services each weekday by December 2019, services that will be delivered using modern, more comfortable 'locohailed' services in the coming months. This has led to different train times and changes to the calling patterns on services across the Wales and Borders network, which has meant that in some circumstances passengers need to connect to other services to reach certain destinations.

Transport for Wales will continue to work with stakeholders and listen to passengers, endeavouring to use the valuable feedback they receive to continually improve and shape their rail plans, including our timetables and connecting services.

National Assembly for Wales action

While not addressing the specific Bangor services identified by the petitioner, in [Plenary in January 2020](#) Rhun ap Iorwerth AM asked the Minister to “make a statement on the effect of recent changes to the train timetables on smaller stations”. The Minister’s response, and the subsequent exchange, are reproduced below:

Ken Skates AM: The December timetable change was the biggest change to services for over three decades. This has benefitted some rail users, whilst other services have unfortunately been affected. Transport for Wales has sought to introduce alternative measures where services have been affected, and are reviewing further timetable amendment possibilities as part of the May timetable change.

Rhun ap Iorwerth AM: This is a case of a question being answered before I have an opportunity to ask it, but there are still some important issues that need to be discussed. A number of constituents contacted me following timetable changes disappointed that services to the smaller stations in Môn—Bodorgan, Rhosneigr, Valley and Llanfairpwll—had been reduced. Yes, we need swift services, but we also need to serve our communities too.

I am pleased that Transport for Wales has got back to me now, since I tabled this question, to say that there have been changes to timetables that meet some of the complaints that were made. Having said that, there are still a number of concerns about the availability of trains to smaller stations at the end of the school day and so on. Transport for Wales have admitted to me, ‘No, we perhaps didn’t consult sufficiently with the communities in making these decisions’, and I think the other concerns about trains at the end of the day is another example of something that could have been flagged up had there been proper consultation undertaken. Does the Minister agree with me that we must have a commitment to very careful consultation with communities in terms of how proposed changes are going to impact them?

Ken Skates AM: Yes, I'd very much agree with the Member, and the issue of proper consultation is something that I've raised with Transport for Wales as we approach the May timetable change. I think it's essential that stakeholder groups, that communities, are informed well in advance of proposed changes so that they can have some input into whether those changes are beneficial or otherwise. There is a contractual obligation, of course, in place to ensure that no stations receive fewer services than was the case when the franchise was let, and that is something that must be upheld, and it's the reason why Transport for Wales have been working to determine alternative services up until May, when those services that were withdrawn from some of the smaller stations can be addressed.