

## **Response to the Petition Committee Re: Reverse the cuts to commuter trains services in North East Wales petition (P-05-944)**

This petition was motivated by the recent changes to the weekday commuter time train service which did link Bangor to stations in North East Wales (departing Bangor at 17:18). This was the only direct service to link Bangor to North East Wales departing between 15:04 and 19:02 (following cuts to two other rush hour services over the past 5 years).

This cut further highlights issues regarding the poor treatment of rail commuters in North Wales compared to those in the South as we shall demonstrate, and which we believe requires urgent action by the Assembly Government.

The service was cut in December without any consultation of local rail users, and even took the train staff by surprise. A direct result of the cut is that we are already aware of a number of 'regular' users who now drive along the coast as they are no longer able to commute by train. These include an NHS dentist who lives in Flintshire and works in Bangor, a number of Bangor University staff who live in North East Wales and Chester, and a consultant at Ysbyty Gwynedd. We are also aware of at least one commuter who is being forced to work an extra day 'for free' to make up his hours as a consequence of being forced to catch an earlier evening train by the cut in the 17:18 service.

We have contacted Transport for Wales (TfW) to complain and received a variety of 'excuses' that include:

1. A shortage of rolling stock. Not particularly credible given the train still runs!
2. The train is to be made up of new rolling stock and so will no longer fit into the North East Wales stations. Hardly credible given similar trains are already stopping at these stations!

In their most recent communication, TfW spokesperson cited timetabling constraints by Network Rail and Great Western Railway as another implausible excuse, a point to which we will return below.

**We find the minister's response particularly unhelpful.** It comes as no surprise that he hides behind the somewhat patronising 'incredibly challenging' timetabling excuse! However, our primary concern lies in his statement:

*"TfW had a commitment to introduce faster Cardiff-Holyhead services each weekday by December 2019, services that would be delivered using modern, more comfortable 'loco hauled' services in the coming months."*

- The 'commitment' is clearly a commitment to the Assembly Government?
- The 'more comfortable' presumably means First Class?
- ***The implication of this statement is clearly that the Welsh Assembly Government policy is to prioritise first class rail users between Holyhead and Cardiff (whoever they may be?) over North Wales commuters.***

The minister went on to state that, *"This has led to different train times and changes to calling patterns across the Wales and the Borders Network, which has meant that in some circumstances passengers need to connect to other services ..."*

We note that on Saturdays the 17:18 service from Bangor still calls at Colwyn Bay, Rhyl, Prestatyn, and Flint, and so using the TfW timetable we have been able to compare the “different train times and changes to calling patterns”:

- On weekdays this train departs Chester (for Cardiff) at 18:22.
- In contrast, on Saturday, this train departs Bangor 2 minutes later and arrives in Chester at 18:29, a net saving of 5 minutes on this section of the journey on weekdays.
- The net impact is that this service arrives in Cardiff at 21:24 on weekdays, and 21:34 on Saturday. i.e. shortening the journey time by 8 minutes on weekdays (does an 8 minute saving on a 4 hour 15 minute journey time really constitute ‘*more comfortable*’?).
- What is more perplexing, from a business view point, is that whilst the changes have adversely impacted North Wales commuters (and in consequence ticket revenue), the new weekday calling pattern include stations like Church Stretton (annual station usage: 0.139M) and Craven Arms (0.1M).
- Passenger numbers are considerably smaller at these stations than the by-passed North Wales stations (e.g. Rhyl 0.52M, Prestatyn 0.332M, see Table 1 more details).
- Despite considerably small passenger footfall, train services stopping at stations south of Strewsbury are already more frequent, in the early evening, than they are in the rush hour in North Wales. For example, a commuter wishing to travel from Bangor to Colwyn Bay, Rhyl, Prestatyn, or Flint has a choice of two direct services at either 16:15 or 19:02. In contrast, early evening trains south from Church Stretton have a frequency of approx. every 30 minutes (ie. 19:07, **19:38**, 20:11). The 19:38 train is the minister’s “*more comfortable*” service!
- ***It would therefore appear that the changes in stopping patterns prioritise passengers in South Shropshire nipping down to Hereford for a pint over North Wales Commuters.***

**We would like to remind the Petitions Committee that the most recent cut to North East Wales weekday rush hour services is only the latest in a series of cuts.**

In recent years, the morning service which used to arrive in Bangor at 9:38 was cut. In the evening, there was previously an hourly direct service between Bangor and the North East Wales stations. Now there is only one changing service between 16:15 and 19:02, departing Bangor at 18:09, which frequently leaves passengers stranded as the connecting service east from Llandudno Junction is often cancelled. Strangely, however there is still an hourly service on a Saturday!

In the other direction, there has also been a reduction in rush hour services which stop at stations in North East Wales. For example, Flint’s ‘busiest’ train (according to station staff) was the 7:21 to Manchester, but this service was cut about 5 years ago. Strangely, it still runs on a Saturday!

We believe that these previous cuts have been at least partly responsible for the significant fall in the number of passengers using North East Wales rail network over the past 5 years (see Table 1).

**Table 1: North Wales station usage figures (from Wikipedia):**

Station/ year	Colwyn Bay	Rhyl	Prestatyn	Flint	Shotton
2014/15	0.292	0.544	0.349	0.266	0.241
2015/16	0.286	0.537	0.349	0.266	0.237
2016/17	0.278	0.534	0.345	0.261	0.234

2017/18	0.269	0.520	0.333	0.258	0.215
2018/19	0.281	0.520	0.334	0.278	0.223
Change	-4%	-5.5%	-5.3%	+4.5%	-8.5%

For comparison, during the same period, passenger numbers using Chester Station have increased substantially (+10.7%), with a UK wide increase in regional rail use of +7.2%.

Our conclusion is that whilst the use of regional railways has increased substantially across the UK in the period 2014/15 – 2018/19, stations in North Wales have not experienced that increase. Indeed, all bar Flint have seen a significant decline. Note that the most recent figures are for 2018/19 and so do not include the impact of the recent cuts.

**Despite the impoverished levels of service, the passengers in North Wales are expected to pay more.** We consider that another contributory factor to the declining passenger numbers is likely to be the high fares charged on the North Wales coast in comparison to the remainder of the Transport for Wales Network. Even following the 10% cut in North Wales rail fares in January, the cost of a single ticket still comes in at around 45p/ mile. For comparison, fares in South Wales equate to around 25p/ mile. This is shown in Table 2.

**Table 2: The costs of travel per mile for rail journeys in South and North Wales, compared.**

Route	Distance (miles)	Anytime single ticket (£)	Cost (£) per mile
Bangor - Flint	48	19.8	0.4125
Swansea - Cardiff	45	12.0	0.2667
Bridgend - Cardiff	24	5.3	0.2208
Maesteg - Cardiff	27	5.0	0.1852
Newport - Cardiff	16	5.4	0.3375
Flint -Llandudno Junction	34	16.7	0.4912
Flint - Colwyn Bay	30	16.7	0.5567
Flint - Rhyl	23	9.3	0.4043
Bangor-Rhyl	25	13.3	0.5320

At the same time, many of the reduced fare options are not available to North Wales commuters. For example, the “Carnet” option is not available between Flint/ Chester and Bangor.

Overall, in our opinion the Assembly Government needs to reconsider their commitment to a sustainable railway network, as they are currently overseeing the decline of an important element of the network at a time of growth elsewhere across the UK.

Furthermore, we would suggest that the ‘visions’ of the electrification of the North Wales Coast line expressed by various ministers and AMs, in recent weeks since the H2S announcement, are simply not credible against the background of declining passenger numbers which we believe are a direct result of the high costs increasing inconvenience associated with North Wales rail commuting.

More broadly, we are disappointed that the minister's response did not address the key points of the petition, namely that impoverished yet overpriced train services in the North Wales that clearly contravene his Assembly Government's policies and commitments by:

1. Forcing people from public transport into their cars, at the time of a climate emergency, contributing to road congestion and greenhouse gas emissions.
2. Denying access to Bangor University by those living in some of Wales' most deprived communities, and more generally curtailing employment opportunities for those who rely on public transport.

**In summary, we consider the minister's response to our petition inadequate and unsatisfactory, and ask the Petitions Committee to consider that:**

- **The most recent commuter train cut appears to prioritise the comfort of a few passengers travelling to South Wales/ Cardiff over the needs of many commuters using the North East Wales stations daily;**
- **Cuts to TfW services in North Wales cannot be excused by the 'incredible complexity' of planning and timetabling constraints;**
- **These cuts disproportionately target the passengers in North Wales, who are already paying more for their rail journeys compared to their counterparts in South Wales;**
- **In consequence, passenger numbers in North Wales are declining, in significant contrast to the growth trend observed in South Wales and across the rest of the UK;**
- **This trend is only set to get worse, jeopardising the Assembly Government plans and commitments to sustainable public transport, addressing climate change, and reducing inequalities.**

**Therefore, we urge the Committee to advise the Government to act decisively, reverse the cuts to commuter trains services in North East Wales, and consider the negative impact of TfW actions more broadly.**

Yours Sincerely,

Prof Thomas Rippeth

Dr Hans-Peter Kubis

Dr Simon Viktor

Dr Mihela Erjavec