

Enterprise and Learning Committee

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Route Utilisation Strategy for Wales:

Draft Committee response to the Network Rail Consultation

1. Introduction

The Committee took evidence at its meetings on 19 September and 24 October 2007 on planning for future railway provision. In particular it considered the implications for Wales of the UK Government's White Paper **Delivering a Sustainable Railway** and the **Wales Rail Planning Assessment** (WRPA), both published in July 2007. The Committee's report on **Planning for Future Rail Provision** was published on 21 November 2007 and debated in Plenary on 23 January 2008. Several of the Committee's recommendations and the subsequent responses from the Minister referred to the **Route Utilisation Strategy for Wales** (RUS) as a key document that would set out in detail the plans for the future of the rail network in Wales over the next ten years. Network Rail published a draft of the RUS for Wales on 29 May 2008. The period for consultation closes on 22 August 2008.

2. Demand forecasts

The Committee heard evidence that recent growth in demand for passenger services in south east Wales had exceeded forecasts and that this trend seemed likely to continue given the programme of improvements and enhancements being implemented.

The Committee recommended that the Welsh Assembly Government should be planning to fund the necessary infrastructure to accommodate this additional growth. It suggested that the RUS should identify where this additional capacity is most needed.

In his response to this recommendation, the Minister said that an update of the forecasts in the WRPA would be published in the RUS and that the Welsh Assembly Government plans to track changes in passenger demand on an annual basis and will update its forecasts and plans for growth accordingly.

The draft RUS appears to be based on growth forecasts for journeys within, to and from the Wales RUS area of 25% to 2018-19 and 35% to 2025-26. The central commuting forecast used for the Cardiff area is 27% to 2018-19 and 37% to 2025-26.

The higher commuting forecasts for the Cardiff area are based on historical trends for the period 1998-99 to 2005-06, although after 2008-09 the assumption is that the rate of growth will fall from 8% per annum in 2006-07 to only 1.2% per annum for 2009-2010 onwards. However the RUS also acknowledges that the growth could be as high as 40% to 2018-19 and 60% by 2025-26, if historical growth rates continue.

Professor Cole from the Wales Transport Research Centre, believes that Network Rail's forecast of a 25% increase in Welsh passenger numbers over the next 10 years is "pessimistic".

The Committee welcomes the assumptions made in the draft RUS about future growth in passenger demand and in particular that commuting flows in the Cardiff area could continue to grow at a higher rate than previously forecast. It is important that Network Rail, the Welsh Assembly Government and the Train Operators work together to monitor changes in passenger demand on an annual basis and update their forecasts and plans for growth accordingly.

The Committee is concerned that if passenger demand across Wales does grow by 25% or more over the next ten years and by 40% or more for the commuting peak in the Cardiff area, then the programme of infrastructure improvements outlined in the draft RUS will not be sufficient to cope with this level of growth.

The Committee seeks a reassurance from Network Rail that additional investment in the railway infrastructure in the Wales RUS area can be accommodated should this be necessary over the next ten years to cater for higher levels of demand.

3. Cardiff Queen Street improvements

The Committee believes that removing the capacity constraint between Cogan Junction and Cardiff Queen Street North Junction is a key priority. This constraint impacts on both north-south and east-west services and is SEWTA's highest priority. The Railway Infrastructure and Improved Passenger Services Committee of the Second Assembly also identified this as an important scheme. It was also identified in the Department for Transport's High Level Output Specification (HLOS). However the Department for Transport made it clear that the HLOS funding is limited to £20m, whilst the total cost could be as high as £50m, depending on whether or not the bridge across Newport Road needs to be rebuilt.

The draft RUS sets out proposals for the remodelling of Queen Street station to provide four through platforms and a new platform for the Cardiff Bay shuttle service, together with enhancements to the Queen Street to Cogan Junction corridor, new platforms at Cardiff Central and improvements to the City Line between Radyr and Cardiff via Ninian Park to permit faster running of two limited stopping trains per hour between Treforest and Cardiff. There would also be two limited stopping services between Caerphilly and Cardiff. This scheme would enable the provision of 16 trains per hour at Queen Street to meet the anticipated growth in demand set out in the

HLOS.

The Minister issued a Cabinet Statement on this scheme on 2 June 2008, committing the Welsh Assembly Government to providing funding of about £7 million, subject to approval of a formal business case. It also included a joint statement by Network Rail, the Assembly Government and the Department for Transport on the agreed programme of enhancements in the Cardiff area. The Department for Transport is likely to be funding some of the additional work required through the HLOS. The statement says that the work will "provide the committed capacity and frequency increases to Queen Street and Cardiff Central for the foreseeable medium term" and will also avoid the need to construct a third deck to the Newport Road bridge.

SEWTA previously told the Committee that in their view "the third span over Newport Road bridge is essential".

The Wales Transport Strategy, published in June 2008, makes reducing car dependency in Wales a key priority for the Welsh Assembly Government.

The Committee welcomes the fact that the draft RUS includes the removal of the capacity constraint between Cogan Junction and Cardiff Queen Street and the joint announcement by Network rail, the Welsh Assembly Government and the Department for Transport of an agreed programme for this and other improvement works to provide the capacity for 16 trains per hour at Queen Street.

However the Committee considers that the potential growth in commuting passenger rail demand, particularly in the light of the Welsh Assembly Government's transport priority of reducing car dependency, will mean that a new bridge span over Newport Road is still likely to be needed within the next ten years and planning for its construction should therefore begin.

4. Freight

The Committee previously heard evidence that the growth in passenger demand could potentially lead to conflicts between the use of the network for freight traffic and for passenger services. The Committee recommended that the Welsh Assembly Government should give a higher priority and more resources to encouraging a modal shift of freight from road to rail.

Since the Committee completed its inquiry, the Assembly Government has consulted on a Freight Strategy for Wales. This identifies as a strategic issue the need to develop the Welsh Assembly Government's role in rail infrastructure use and development and to consider how Network Rail can best respond to the rail freight needs of Wales.

The Committee would like to see a greater emphasis in the RUS on the Assembly Government's emerging freight strategy and on the need to invest more in the railway infrastructure in Wales to encourage a modal shift of freight from road to rail.

5. Committee on Rail Infrastructure and Improved Passenger Services - priority schemes

Evidence was also provided to the Committee about the importance of a number of other schemes identified by the Railway Infrastructure and Improved Passenger Services (RIIPS) Committee of the Second Assembly.

The priority schemes identified by the RIIPS Committee were:

improvements to the north-south service including enhancing capacity between Wrexham and Saltney;

enhancing capacity on the Cambrian Line in order to allow an hourly service;

provision of enhanced services on the main line through west Wales, particularly west of Carmarthen;

timetable improvements and better rolling stock on the Heart of Wales Line;

the electrification of the Borderlands line between Wrexham and Bidston;

enhancing frequencies on the Valley Lines and

removal of the capacity constraint at Gowerton.

The Welsh Assembly Government had previously accepted most of the recommendations of the RIIPS Committee report, subject to feasibility studies.

In its previous report, the Committee recommended that once the work on the RUS was complete, the Welsh Assembly Government should publish a programme of the infrastructure improvements that it intends to fund over the next ten years, taking into account the priorities identified by the RIIPS Committee. The Minister has agreed to do this.

Most of the schemes identified by the RIIPS Committee appear in some form in the draft RUS.

The document recommends a major feasibility study is conducted into implementing improvements to the north-south service. This study would include consideration of partial or full redoubling of the Wrexham to Saltney section and the provision of signalling enhancements at Abergavenny to avoid conflict between passenger and freight services.

The infrastructure for a future hourly service on the Cambrian Line is being provided by Network Rail in conjunction with the installation of a new signalling system. The Welsh Assembly Government is funding the additional infrastructure but has not yet committed funding for the hourly service.

The requirement for an hourly service into west Wales between Swansea and Milford Haven is identified in the draft RUS as a gap but the document states that the existing infrastructure is sufficient to provide this service if required. The document also notes that the future of the section between Clarbston Road and Fishguard is largely tied to the continued presence of the ferry link to Rosslare.

The draft RUS states that no economic case for a fifth Heart of Wales Line train can be made.

The electrification of the Borderlands line is considered by the draft RUS. Two options are being considered; one would extend electrification of the line from Bidston as far as Shotton and the other all the way to Wrexham Central. A half hourly service on this line is also being considered. Further work on a business case is being taken forward as part of the Merseyside RUS.

Some of the improvements sought to the Valley lines are already committed and under construction. Others are covered by the programme of enhancements in the Cardiff area announced in June and described above, although the funding for the Maesteg and Rhymney frequency improvements is not yet formally committed. The extension of the Ebbw Valley line to Newport is identified as a current scheme in the draft RUS, although the document states that this is subject to a decision to implement this option in either the 2009-2014 or 2014-2019 control periods.

The removal of the capacity constraint at Gowerton is also considered by the draft RUS and is the subject of an economic appraisal and demand forecasting by Network Rail, SWWITCH and the Welsh Assembly Government. It estimates the current cost to be between £20m and £30m.

The Committee welcomes the inclusion in the draft RUS of most of the priority schemes identified by the Railway Infrastructure and Improved Passenger Services Committee of the Second Assembly. It would like to see the final version of the RUS set out clearly a list of schemes to be taken forward, indicating sources of funding and timescales for their completion. It is disappointed that an economic case cannot be made for a fifth train on the Heart of Wales Line.

The Committee would also urge the Minister to publish a list of schemes and service enhancements that the Welsh Assembly Government intends to support as soon as possible after the final RUS is published. This should include a firm commitment to the extension of the Ebbw Valley line to Newport in the 2009-2014 control period.

6. Stations

Passenger Focus had previously told the Committee that dissatisfaction with stations was higher in Wales than elsewhere in Britain and that investment was needed, particularly at unstaffed stations.

The Committee previously recommended that the Welsh Assembly Government should work with Network Rail and Arriva Trains Wales to seek further improvements in the quality of stations in Wales.

The draft RUS identifies the following stations that are to be improved through the Department for Transport's National Station Improvement Programme:

Swansea Shrewsbury

Chester Llandudno

Rhyl Cardiff Central

Hereford Aberystwyth

Port Talbot Parkway Carmarthen

Severn Tunnel Junction

The Committee welcomes the plans to improve some of the major stations in the Wales RUS area, but considers that a programme of investment to make improvements at smaller unstaffed stations is also needed.

7. Electrification

The draft RUS identifies electrification of the South Wales Mainline and of the Valley lines as possible long-term (ie: after 2019) options.

The Committee supports investigation of the possibility of electrification of the South Wales Mainline from Swansea and Cardiff to London and of the Valley lines.

8. New railway line - London to Cardiff

The draft RUS also mentions the possibility of the construction of new railway lines to improve connectivity in the long-term. On 23 June 2008, Network Rail announced that it will be conducting a strategic review into the case for building new rail lines across the network of Great Britain. The review will look at five of Network Rail's strategic routes, including the Great Western Main Line.

The Committee supports Network Rail's intention to review the case for the construction of a new rail line between London and South Wales.

