

Enterprise and Learning Committee

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National Assembly for Wales: Enterprise and Learning Committee

Inquiry into Future Railway Infrastructure In Wales

Submission from Taith

November 2009

Purpose

This is a paper to be presented to the Enterprise and Learning Committee in response to an invitation from the Committee Clerk to give evidence on Monday 23rd November 2009.

Background

Taith, is the local authority Regional Transport Consortium for North Wales and is a voluntary partnership between Isle of Anglesey County Council, Gwynedd*, Conwy, Denbighshire, Flintshire, and Wrexham.

*Excluding the Merionydd District which is in the Tracc Consortium.

Taith very much welcomes the opportunity to provide evidence to Committee.

Previous submission of evidence to this committee in September 2007 focused on the revision to the Taith Rail Strategy, Wrexham - Bidston Electrification, Holyhead - London services, with strategic rail planning in Wales and the Trans European Network.

Development of the Taith Rail Strategy

As part of the development of the evidence base for the Taith Regional Transport Plan and to inform our thinking so as to inform the Wales National Transport Plan, Taith commissioned consultants in late 2008 to undertake a rail strategy study to update the previous rail strategy in parallel with the development of the Regional Transport Plan, and to include costed and appraised projects for consideration by Taith and the Welsh Assembly Government.

Five main areas were considered in the brief;

Developing Schemes to upgrade the existing rail network

Appraising the potential for new stations

Developing the North Wales Freight Strategy

Assessing how non-car access could be improved to principal stations (including the potential for Station Travel Plans)

Identify locations where station car parking needs to be expanded

In developing the strategy consultees included;

Arriva Trains Wales;

DB Wrexham & Shropshire Trains

Network Rail;

Passenger Focus

Taith Local Authority Officers

Taith Board

Rail Freight Group

A summary of the North Wales Rail Strategy Study document is appended to this paper for the Members reference.

Rail is referenced in the Regional Transport Plan and the relevant summary extract (P49) is shown below;

"Rail Passenger Services"

A recently completed rail study (the North Wales Rail Strategy Study) undertaken for Taith has identified opportunities for rail service enhancements, new stations, improvements to non-car station access and car parking at stations. Major infrastructure improvements which will play an integral part in improving rail travel include line speed improvements across North Wales and the recently approved scheme to redouble the single track section from Saltney Junction to Wrexham. Some of individual schemes for both infrastructure and service improvements, have a national significance and contribute to the aims and objectives of the Wales Transport Strategy. These should be included within the National Transport Plan, and funded directly by WAG.

The short term (2010-2011) rail service enhancements include doubling the frequency on the Borderlands line to half hourly, with timetable optimised for connections with North Wales Coast line services at Shotton. Extension of the hourly Llandudno - Manchester train to Manchester Airport is probably feasible under the current timetable. However a more attractive solution would be to accelerate the timings between Chester and Manchester by omitting all stops apart from Warrington Bank Quay, with an additional hourly service between Chester and Manchester calling at all stations.

This would considerably improve access to the Manchester conurbation for residents and businesses in North Wales. Along with additional service improvements proposed in the medium (2012-2019) and longer term (2020-2024), there are aspirations for new stations at Towyn, Greenfield, Queensferry, Deeside Park, Rossett and Johnstown. Most of these options could only be feasible in conjunction with line speed improvements and service enhancements which would require additional rolling stock.

There are many generic proposals for improving non-car station access at all stations including secure cycle parking provisions at all stations within the region and specific improvements to for cycling, walking and public transport access to Wrexham General, Ruabon, Shotton, Flint, Prestatyn, Rhyl, Colwyn Bay, Llandudno Junction, Bangor, Llanfairpwll, Holyhead, and Porthmadog stations. These would be promoted using standardised signage and branding and could be implemented as part of a wider public transport branding strategy including all modes and associated infrastructure. Car parking improvements are proposed in the short term at Chirk, Rhosneigr, Ruabon, Llandudno, Buckley, Caergwrle, Flint, and Prestatyn. The Llandudno scheme forms part of a larger scheme being taken forward under Network Rail's National Station Improvement Plan (NSIP). Longer term proposals are suggested for Holyhead, Bangor and Wrexham General.

Rail Freight

There is considerable scope for increasing the number of rail freight services operated on all the lines within the Taith area. Options contained in the North Wales Rail Strategy Study include a rail freight terminal at Holyhead for trains that would serve as a land bridge between Ireland and mainland Europe. This could reduce the number of heavy lorries that operate along the A55 from the port of Holyhead.

Other options include the provision of a freight terminal at Blaenau Ffestiniog to allow the movement of slate waste by rail, consolidation centres at Deeside and Wrexham which could also be used for waste, redevelopment of the rail terminal at the port of Mostyn, and reactivation of the mothballed freight terminal at Llandudno Junction. The Blaenau Ffestiniog proposal would include upgrading the Conway Valley line to enable heavy freight trains to operate.

Longer term projects to transfer freight from road to rail include the possible upgrade of the gauge of the North Wales Coast line from W8 (clearance for 8' 6" containers on conventional flat wagons) to W10 (clearance for the more widely used 9' 6" containers), or even to full piggyback clearance which would allow the carriage of lorries on trains.

Shipping

There is potential to attract new shipping routes to the port of Holyhead particularly if rail freight facilities are available. Rail facilities at the port of Mostyn could also be better utilised if upgraded and utilised as a freight hub for the Eastern part of the region. Around the coast, a number of harbours and jetties handle coastal shipping for specific traffic whilst others are currently disused. It has been suggested that greater use should be made of coastal shipping rather than road freight to reduce climate change and other environmental impacts but the viability and emissions performance of

current coastal vessels needs to be carefully considered. The smaller harbours and landing facilities which are either not served by commercial freight services or are currently disused may offer opportunities for coastal shipping to be used for bulk products.

Q1 - The case for a high speed rail link between London and South Wales.

In responding to this question - Taith will answer for the case for a high speed link between London and North Wales and for the case for the electrification of the North Wales Coast main line (Crewe - Chester - Holyhead) and the line between Chester - Warrington Bank Quay.

The North Wales Coast main line (Chester - Holyhead) not only forms part of a Trans European Transport Route (TEN-T) but is one of the listed 30 Priority Axis routes in Europe (Number 26 - Holyhead - Chester - Crewe).

The electrification of the North Wales Coast main line has long been an aspiration of Taith and that the North Wales Economic Forum. Taith was originally a sub group of the forum prior to its formal establishment in 2001.

Together Taith, its constituent authorities and the North Wales Economic Forum have consistently over several years lobbied for improvements of this line and for the improved service pattern and journey times to London.

The Welsh Assembly Government has three times in recent months made reference to the electrification of the North Wales Coast main line; (1) On the 23rd July 2009 in a statement by the Deputy First Minister in his response to the announcement by the DfT of the proposed electrification of the London - Swansea main line, (2) In its consultation response to the Electrification Route Utilisation Study (RUS) on the 13th July, which was recently published by Network Rail. (November 2009) and, (3) Recommendation 5.10 of the Ministerial Advisory Group's report, and the Government's subsequent response, which was published alongside this report on the 15th July 2009.

Taith is keen to work with the Welsh Assembly Government, our partners in the Mersey Dee Alliance and in the North West of England to ensure that the development of HS2 to the North West of England builds in an appropriate interface with the North Wales Coast main line thereby permitting North Wales services from North Wales services to benefit from the new high speed line. Without this interface there is a real and present threat that North Wales could lose its direct trains to London, particularly if the Crewe - Chester line is electrified in isolation.

On a broader front the longer term aspiration of a high speed line to Holyhead would be welcomed as part of the development of the European High Speed network to serve Dublin.

A strategic TEN-T study of the corridor to refresh the case for the development of this European corridor would be welcomed.

Q2 - The Case for an Improved North - South Main Line

Taith in its recent submission of its Regional Transport Plan which was submitted to the Welsh Assembly Government on the 30th September strongly supported in particular the schemes as set out in the rail forward programme that were announced by the Deputy First Minister on the 5th December 2008.

Capacity improvements (Saltney Junction - Wrexham General) & journey time reductions (Holyhead - Newport)

NSIP Programme (Llandudno Station)

Wrexham - Bidston Electrification

Conwy Valley Line Upgrade

In particular the capacity improvements over the Saltney Junction - Wrexham General are central to unlocking improved journey time, reliability, development of new services, acceleration of services and the addition of new stations in the area.

With regard to rail re-openings the following paragraph set out the statements made by Taith in its recent submitted RTP in connection with the case for new rail links between North and South Wales.

(Extract from Taith - Regional Transport Plan P23)

"In the longer term, whilst there are proposals for trunk road improvements, Taith would welcome similar proposals to be brought forward for further rail re-openings to and between key settlements as set out in the Wales Spatial Plan to be better connected especially those in Central and North Western North Wales to centres in Mid Wales, South West Wales and South East Wales. Development of a rail re-opening programme as a longer term programme would complement the trunk road programme in order to achieve the vision for a truly integrated transport system within and to / from Wales"

The National Transport Plan includes a commitment to increase the frequency of rail services between north and south Wales as well as improving journey times. Taith would advocate the introduction of a south - north business train of a similar standard to the "Y Gerallt Cymro" service which caters for north - south business journeys, as the current service pattern of the 0510 from Cardiff is too early and the 0720 arrives in North Wales too late for mid morning meetings. This service should run via Wrexham General to ensure the benefits of such a service are felt by all parts of North Wales.

Q3 - The Case for electrification of other railway lines in Wales;

The main response for this question is covered in the response to Question 1 but we would add the further following evidence.

Taith would welcome as part of a programme of electrification in Wales, the inclusion of the infill between Chester - Shrewsbury and Newport would allow for the full electrification of all the urban and long distance main lines in Wales.

The Newport - Shrewsbury - Crewe section is currently identified by the Department for Transport as a diversionary route on the UK wide Strategic Freight Network (SFN) and its inclusion for electric traction of freight would clearly be helpful.

Q4 - The need for speed upgrades and capacity improvements across the network in Wales.

These are listed as set out in Network Rail's Route 21 Business Plan, Wales RUS (Dec 2008) and Wales Route Planning Assessment (2007).

Line speed improvements over the Holyhead - Newport section are being currently being investigated by Network Rail on behalf of the Welsh Assembly Government as part of the NTP Project 10 (North - South Journey Time Improvements - including Saltney Junction to Wrexham North re-doubling / capacity enhancements). The initial analysis from the Taith Rail Strategy study suggested that a positive

business case for improvement should be achievable and that line speed improvements should therefore be pursued as per the economic appraisal contained within the Scott Wilson report.

In particular the identified pinch point of the Saltney Junction - Wrexham North section of track was confirmed in the analysis and has subsequently been included in the Rail Forward Programme (RFP) and the consultation version of the National Transport Plan (NTP). This proposal was successful in an application for funds from the 1st tranche of funding from the Strategic Capital Investment Fund (SCIF).

Another outcome of the Scott Wilson study identified opportunity to make journey time savings by undertaking work on the track and signalling between Gobowen and Shrewsbury.

The Wrexham - Bidston (Borderlands) line is also in need of line speed improvements / journey time enhancements to make the service delivery more robust. At the present time two (150) units operate an hourly service with 57 minute single journey times. This affords a maximum of 3 minutes recovery at each end. This work would be more efficient, as well as presumably more cost effective in the long term, than introducing a third unit into the timetable to maintain robustness.

It should be noted that Taith has an aspiration to improve the frequency of the diesel operation on the Borderlands line to every 30 minutes throughout the day, with additional journeys in the morning to facilitate early arrivals at Deeside Industrial Park (Hawarden Bridge) and Wrexham towards more sustainable access to work, education and training. Network Rail are currently appraising the cost of increasing the diesel service, following a commission from Taith and Merseytravel. The line, which already has journey attractors along the line at Liverpool / Wirral, Deeside and Wrexham and their employment, training and heritage links, would benefit from enhanced service frequencies coupled with more robust connections at Shotton which would also support the emerging development at Northern Gateway.

Q5 - The State of the Severn Tunnel and the need for a 2nd Severn Tunnel / Crossing

In responding to this question, Taith will address the issue of the provision of a rail tunnel from Holyhead - Dublin.

Taith appreciates that this is a long term aspiration but recognises the need for long term thinking and making the most of its strategic European role that the North Wales Coast Main line / A55 provides between the Republic of Ireland / England and Continental Europe.

In the longer term with the increasing requirement for the reduction of both the absolute level of carbon and the carbon intensity of transport, the role of high speed rail will become the mode of choice for long distance surface transport.

The connection of the Irish Sea across the Holyhead - Dublin route would provide the most direct route from the Republic of Ireland to London and its connection to the European High Speed Rail Network.

It is also essential that provision is made for a connection between High Speed 2 (HS2) and High Speed 1 (HS1) in order to ensure that journey times for destinations north of London are not disadvantaged as a result of the need to physically change trains.

Q6 - Further Use of Light Rail

In the case of North Wales in the medium term only Wrexham / and the Greater Deeside could be seen of the size and development density to be able to support a light rail network. This could include the use of such trams to support freight deliveries in urban areas.

The outcomes from the current light rail inquiry which is being undertaken by the All Party Parliamentary Light Rail Group and Passenger Transport Executive Group (PTEG) which is considering progress in this area and the barriers to implementation of such schemes, is awaited.

Q7 - The Case for new stations and new / re-opened lines

In the case of Taith, the Rail Strategy and included in the Regional Transport Plan, included reference to proposed additional stations at;

Kimnel Bay & Towyn

Holywell (Greenfield)

Queensferry

Rossett

Johnstown

Deeside Park

The case for any additional stations would need to be developed in an integrated way with the development of the service pattern to service these stations.

As part of the Taith Rail Strategy, a programme of access improvements to the stations was identified and included in the Regional Transport Plan. Key sites were identified as;

Holyhead

Llanfairpwll

Bangor

Llandudno Junction

Colwyn Bay

Rhyl

Prestatyn

Flint

Shotton

Wrexham

Ruabon

Porthmadog (Is funded through Taith but is referenced by Tracc in their RTP)

A separate study of the potential for Freight on the Conwy Valley line was undertaken earlier this year by Gwynedd Council and the Welsh Assembly Government. It is understood that the report has now been completed and is with the Welsh Assembly Government.

Taith is supportive of the proposal to utilise the currently 'mothballed' Trawsfynydd to Blaenau Ffestiniog railway line for passenger services as well as developing the freight-carrying potential of the line to support the economic and social regeneration of the Trawsfynydd, Blaenau Ffestiniog and upper Conwy Valley areas.

In around 30 years time it is understood that the line will be required to transfer intermediate level nuclear waste from Trawsfynydd Nuclear power Station to the national waste repository in north-west England.

Taith welcomes the recent announcement by the Welsh Assembly Government regarding the commissioning of Network Rail to look at the cost and works required to reopen the Gaerwen - Amlwch line as far as Llangefni. This is consistent with Taith's aspirations as contained in the Passenger Transport annexe of the Regional Transport Plan, which confirms the consortia's desire to "protect the Gaerwen - Amlwch alignment as a transport corridor for possible future rail use, initially to a station at Llangefni". This potential reopening would be a significant improvement to the transport links between Anglesey and mainland Gwynedd and would assist in reducing road based traffic across the Menai crossings, and be an integral component of implementing Sustainable Travel area concepts in the Môn a Menai regeneration area. Introducing additional rail services through Llanfairpwll station could also be a catalyst for developing the station as a Park and Ride facility for travel to Bangor and Llandudno Junction. The reopening could also be beneficial in that it would if extended from Llangefni to Amlwch, provide a rail link for transporting construction materials to north Anglesey in the event that a new nuclear power facility is built at Wylfa

Taith also recognises the cross border nature of railways and as part of an All - Wales approach to re-opening railway lines would need to work with Tracc to evaluate the business cases for reopening previously closed sections of the lines from Ruabon via Llangollen into Mid Wales and currently 'mothballed' sections of the former Cambrian Line to/ from Oswestry (from the Marches Line at Gobowen) possibly extending into Llanymynech and beyond.

Q8 - How to increase the use of railways for freight; including freight transfer facilities.

As part of the Taith Rail Strategy Study the needs of Freight were considered as a core part of the study. From the study, two of the projects are being taken forward for further development as part of a RTP pre-works programme;

F1 / F2 - New 'Landbridge' service between Northern Europe, West Midlands and Holyhead, along with a freight terminal at Holyhead

F5 - Load Consolidation Centre at Deeside Park

Additionally the study identified Project RTP F13: Rail Freight Awareness Campaign / Promotion as a high ranking project to be taken forward.

Another area which was considered for inclusion was the use of rail as a potential transport option for the removal Domestic Waste by the North Wales Waste Treatment Partnership (Project RTP F12).

The study also evaluated the use of the sidings at Llandudno Junction as a strategic freight location with its key spatial location at the head of the Conwy Valley.

As outlined in the response to Question 1 concerning the TEN-T Priority Axis, Taith would go further that the proposed recommendation of the recent WASC into Ports in Wales to suggest that the views of the Irish Government should be included as part of a strategic TEN-T multi-modal review of this strategic European corridor.

Q9 - The role of the Welsh Government, Regional Transport Consortia, and Regional Transport Plans in future railway planning.

Currently in terms of railways the role of the Transport Consortia with railways can be summarised as follows;

Access to / from the station is the responsibility of the Local Authority and the delivery responsibility for this is through the Regional Transport Plan. This has also included some of the on - station investments such as the provision of shelters and Customer Information Systems (CIS).

Taith has also active engagement with Arriva Trains Wales, Virgin Trains and Welsh Assembly Government with service development and timetabling issues. For the first time, Taith, similar to SEWTA now has a Regional Rail Strategy which needs to be integrated between the NTP and it's own RTP.

In North Wales there has been significant investment in additional CIS systems over the last four years through the Taith Public Transport Infrastructure Programme. Stations which has been benefited from this investment have included Valley, Rhosneigr, Ty Croes, Bodorgan, Llanfairpwll, Colwyn Bay, Llandudno Junction and Chirk.

Flint Station, a station of the year award winner, benefited from Transport Grant investment through the investment in the main station building, the conversion of the 1st floor in 2006/7 to host the Taith Management Unit and the re-opening of the up platform waiting room in 2008.

Currently the Transport Consortia are able in agreement with WAG to bring forward railway programme schemes up to and including GRIP stage 3 at which point if they proceed further they would become a National Transport Plan scheme.

With the advent of the introduction of the Regional Transport Plans from the 1st April 2010 that as part of the forthcoming revisions to the delivery arrangements that the Consortia should have a more formal role with WAG / Train Operating Companies / NR in recognition that the RTP now plays an important part in the delivery of the Wales Transport Strategy and complementing the National Transport Plan - Rail Forward Programme.

Strategic Rail Planning and its integration as part of the wider need to provide integrated transport should now be easier with four transport consortia than dealing with 22 local authorities.

However sufficient levels of revenue funding will be essential to compliment / support capital investments.

Q10 - Whether or not the Welsh Government should be seeking additional powers and associated funding that would allow them to directly fund railway infrastructure in Wales; in the same way as the Scottish Government does in Scotland.

Taith in broad terms would support increased powers for the Welsh Assembly Government to a level similar to that of the Scottish Government currently enjoys. However there are different issues in Wales to consider which are not characteristic to the rail network in Scotland, in that the boundary between Wales and England, means that much of the Marches line and part of the Heart of Wales line are within England as is part of the North Wales Coast Main Line. Unlike Scotland, there are many rail journeys between various locations within Wales that cannot be reached without travelling through England.

Clearly there would need to be an agreement with the UK Government to ensure that the needs of these cross border lines in particular would be taken into account.

**Michael Whittaker,
Executive Officer,
16th November 2009**