

Enterprise and Learning Committee

EL(3) 25-09 (p5) : 23 November 2009

Inquiry into the Future Rail Infrastructure in Wales

1 Purpose

1.1 The following is a statement of evidence on behalf of the South West Wales Integrated Transport Consortium (SWWITCH). The consortium comprises the four Councils in South West Wales, namely Carmarthenshire County Council, Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council, Pembrokeshire County Council and the City and County of Swansea.

2 Background

2.1 Partnership in Progress - The Regional Transport Plan for South West Wales 2010-2015

2.1.1 The Regional Transport Plan for South West Wales was submitted to the Welsh Assembly Government in September 2009 after adoption by each of the four constituent Councils of SWWITCH. Its development was rooted in extensive consultation with key stakeholders, a range of disciplines within the local Authorities, other agencies, representative groups and the wider public.

The Plan sets out the regional priorities for the development of rail services as follows:

Description	Detail	Priority
Improvements to Rail Services West of Swansea	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Redoubling the line west of Swansea to secure improved services to west Wales including3 trains per hour between Swansea, Gowerton, Llanelli and CarmarthenHourly services from Carmarthen to Milford Haven5 trains per day to Fishguard Harbour	1
Improving Rail Services to Cardiff, Bristol and London	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Reducing the journey times to Cardiff, London and beyondImproving access to and facilities at mainline stations drawing on all sources including National Station Improvement Programme funds and EU Convergence funding	2
Improving the access to and use of rail services	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Five trains per day on the Heart of Wales LineImproving the Swanline service, serving local stations between Swansea and Port TalbotDeveloping new stations where justified and reviewing the long term role of smaller stationsMaintenance and development of the South West Wales Community Rail Partnership	3

2.1.2 These priorities arose out of an extensive consultation process and were also informed by research into travel patterns within the region in 2008 which demonstrated the predominance and importance of movements within the region. They may however be subject to change as part of the ongoing process of monitoring and review of the plan and the development of Annual Progress Reports.

2.1.3 Because responsibilities for the development and funding of rail services rest with National and Welsh Assembly Governments, the Plan does not set out a comprehensive set of policies or a strategy specifically for rail services. It does nonetheless set out a number of policies relating in whole or in part to rail services:

Policy E2 - SWWITCH will facilitate and promote improved rail and bus services, walking, cycling and car sharing to encourage modal shift and improve air quality

Policy E4 - SWWITCH will work collaboratively to encourage more sustainable freight distribution through better use of rail, intermodal facilities and ports

Policy IT1 - SWWITCH will develop improved interchange facilities, including Park and Ride schemes, to reduce the barriers to multi modal journeys

Policy IT2 - SWWITCH will work collaboratively to encourage the development and take up of smartcards and other multi modal

ticketing opportunities

Policy IT3 - SWWITCH will develop user friendly sustainable travel information to support multi modal journeys

Policy IC2 - SWWITCH will press for improvements to the rail network in and beyond South West Wales into Sewta and TraCC to encourage more inward investment and support modal shift for passengers and freight

2.1.4 The last policy referred to above is particularly relevant in the context of this inquiry, indicating as it does that SWWITCH recognises the importance to its region of good rail connections and services beyond the region.

2.2 Committed Infrastructure Improvements in West Wales

2.2.1 SWWITCH welcomes the commitment by the Welsh Assembly Government in its Rail Forward Programme to the redoubling of the approximately 5 miles of track between Cockett junction, west of Swansea, and Dyffryn West junction, east of Llanelli. (See Appendix 1 - Existing and Proposed Track Layout Diagrams - supplied by Network Rail) The project is being progressed by Network Rail, with funding from the Welsh Assembly Government, and has a target completion date of December 2012. This will pave the way for service enhancements west of Swansea for which a positive business case has been demonstrated by a study carried out for SWWITCH in 2008. Recognising that the enhanced services would require additional funding, the consortium has written to the Deputy First Minister urging an early commitment to the enhancements.

2.3 Matters of Concern to the Inquiry

2.3.1 The case for a high speed rail link between London and South Wales (in addition to the recent announcement that the existing mainline is to be electrified).

SWWITCH is supportive of the work that has been undertaken to date by those interested in making and publicising the case for the next High speed line to be to south Wales. The strong view from economic fora, the Wales Spatial Plan groups and the transport consortia is that a faster and more reliable rail connection to Bristol, London and Europe is a vital part of securing and maintaining inward investment at the level necessary to improve the Welsh economy and stimulate and support entrepreneurship and up-skilling in the workforce. Clearly there needs to be a business case developed and then good political consensus that ensures that a sustained campaign can be developed at both Cardiff and Westminster levels.

SWWITCH recognises and broadly supports the work of Greengauge21 in setting out a national strategy for development of high speed rail routes but regards it as a minimum requirement that any high speed rail link proposals for south Wales must come at least as far west as Swansea.

However, SWWITCH is also concerned that the development of a high speed rail link between London and South Wales should not divert or absorb funding from the important rail infrastructure and service developments needed within the region.

2.3.2 The case for an improved north-south line

SWWITCH recognises the significance of improved north-south transport links for the development of Wales as a coherent nation. However, the consortium is concerned that improvement of those links should not be to the detriment of the important east-west corridors which reflect the fundamental geography of the country and are vital to its position in the wider UK and European economies.

2.3.3 The case for electrification of other railway lines in Wales, including the Valleys Lines, the Severn Tunnel diversionary route via Gloucester and the North Wales Mainline.

The benefits of electrification in terms of journey reliability, time savings and comfort are desirable across all rail lines and SWWITCH therefore supports the electrification of the whole south Wales TENS route as far as Pembroke Dock/Milford Haven/Fishguard Harbour. However, SWWITCH does appreciate the competing demands for rail investment and recognises the need for a positive business case to be established. Consequently SWWITCH believes that each case should be considered on its own merits.

2.3.4 The need for speed upgrades and capacity improvements across the network in Wales (looking beyond Control Period 4 - 2009-2014 and the Wales Route Utilisation Strategy to 2019)

This ties in closely to the High Speed line development issue. Because of the tortuous nature of the alignment of significant sections of track west of Cardiff there are limited opportunities for line speed enhancements, without a new line being built. Therefore, the only practical way to speed up passenger services is to remove (or make request) some stops along the route. SWWITCH believes that the current level of service in the region is the minimum that should be provided and thus any new limited stop services should be in addition to and not instead of current stopping services. Speed improvements for south Wales passengers travelling to and from London would arise if trains from south Wales did not have to observe stops such as Swindon, Didcot and Reading. These stops provide extra commuting capacity for London but have real disbenefits for passengers from Wales.

In terms of infrastructure capacity enhancements the situation of stations and platforms lengths can only be considered on a case by case basis, in the context of passenger loadings at present and of future projections related to factors such as local development proposals and population/employment trends.

2.3.5 The state of the Severn Tunnel and the need for a second Severn rail tunnel/crossing

Clearly the Severn Tunnel is a potential constraint on longer distance services to and from the south west Wales region. Its condition and capacity needs to be kept under constant review with a view to the likely timescale and complexity of any solutions to provide additional capacity.

With regard to a second rail crossing of the Severn estuary, SWWITCH considers that this should be investigated in conjunction with proposals for tidal power generation. In particular, the construction of a tidal barrage for power generation may offer the possibility of a rail crossing at substantially lower additional cost than the construction of a second tunnel or a rail bridge.

2.3.6 Further use of light rail in urban areas

The City & County of Swansea Environment, Regeneration and Culture Overview Board are continuing to consider the feasibility of a Light Rapid Transit application for Swansea and have agreed, in principle, to support a study. It is proposed that the study would consider an east west corridor from Port Talbot to Llanelli via Swansea City Centre, together with a north south route to serve the City Centre itself. However there is no budget currently available for this study and, in the current financial climate, it is unclear whether and when money for a study might be identified.

More generally it has to be recognised that light rail schemes require high levels of investment. Consequently it is important that the case for them is properly established. The problems for which light rail is seen as a possible solution need to be clearly identified, as do the specific objectives for any proposed system. There then needs to be a comprehensive analysis of possible options, including rigorous assessment of likely operating costs and revenues, to determine whether light rail is the best option for achieving those objectives and, if so, the likely ongoing funding requirements.

2.3.7 The case for new stations and new/reopened lines

Within the SWWITCH area there currently proposals for new or improved stations at Gowerton, as part of the redoubling scheme referred to earlier, and at Goodwick, near Fishguard, in connection with the proposed enhancement of the service to/from Fishguard Harbour. In both cases a positive business case has been established as part of proposals for significantly improved local services in west Wales.

There are also plans for the substantial reconstruction of Port Talbot Parkway station and for the development of high quality interchange facilities at Neath, Whitland, Pembroke Dock and Milford Haven.

More generally SWWITCH recognises the need to remain open to the impact of rail passenger growth arising from new development, new employment opportunities or simply because of traffic congestion and of opportunities to develop new stations. However, because each new station has an impact on existing services and customers there must be a comprehensive analysis, as part of the development of a business case, which details the benefits and disbenefits.

In respect of new or reopened routes there is a need to consider and protect appropriate alignments where there may be a case for rail development in future. The role of the National Assembly should be to commission a high level study to look into the future (25 years plus) scenario and do the long term planning needed, in the context of increasing road congestion and concerns regarding traffic related air pollution and the impact of road freight movements.

2.3.8 How to increase the use of the railways for freight, including freight transfer facilities

A multi-modal freight facility at Margam Wharf, Port Talbot was one of 75 schemes identified in the process of developing the Regional Transport Plan which passed a prioritisation screening process. However, recognising that the success of such facilities is closely linked to the volume and nature of the commercial freight market, the proposal is not included in the initial 5 year RTP programme, although it remains for future consideration.

More generally, the Welsh Assembly Government needs to focus on removing barriers to the transfer of freight from road to rail. The Rail Freight Facilities Grant needs to be promoted more actively and the limited budget for the grant should be reviewed. The criteria for the grant have been unchanged for several years and may therefore warrant review in respect of such aspects as the level of intervention (currently 50%) and the value attributed to the lorry miles saved. The grant may be particularly relevant in the context of developments regarding regional waste disposal where there is an opportunity for joint policy development. Consideration should also be given to the way in which the land-use planning system can be used to encourage development close to rail routes and to ensure that rail is used for the transport of raw materials and finished product.

SWWITCH is also mindful of the recent Department for Transport consultation on a National Policy Statement for Ports and the current House of Commons Transport Committee inquiry into the subject. The SWWITCH area includes several major ports including Fishguard, Milford Haven, Swansea and Port Talbot, some of which are of national significance. It is important that rail connections into these ports are maintained or improved/developed to maximise the opportunity for onward carriage of goods by rail.

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

The Regional Transport Consortia, and the Regional Transport Plans which they have developed, focus primarily on regional issues. There is therefore a role for the National Assembly in providing the overarching national perspective and in linking with wider UK rail planning issues. There is a need for transparency in these arrangements with a clear understanding of who does what and close communication and cooperation between the National Assembly and the consortia.

2.3.10 Whether or not the Welsh Government should be seeking additional powers and associated funding that would allow to them to

directly fund railway infrastructure in Wales, in the same way as the Scottish Government does in Scotland

SWWITCH supports the principle of the Welsh Assembly Government seeking additional powers and the associated funding to directly fund railway infrastructure development in Wales, provided that

the funding is adequate and is ring fenced for rail infrastructure purposes

such an arrangement does not impede progress on major issues such as the Severn Tunnel, a second rail crossing of the Severn or a new high speed line, which are all of such a scale that would require funding at a UK level.

Appendix 1 - Existing and Proposed Track Layout Diagrams

Cockett Junction to Dyffryn West Junction Track Re-doubling

