

Enterprise and Learning Committee

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Future Railway Infrastructure in Wales

Sewta evidence

Background:

Sewta (South East Wales Transport Alliance) is a formal Local Government Joint Committee (Board) responsible for the strategic planning of public transport in South East Wales. The region covers ten local authorities spreading from Monmouthshire in the east to Bridgend in the west and Cardiff and Vale of Glamorgan in the south to the Heads of the Valleys in the north. Uniquely, and importantly, our Board includes Partners representing the public transport operators and users, namely:

Arriva Trains Wales (providing local and regional services in South East Wales)

First Great Western (providing regional and inter-city services in South East Wales)

Confederation of Passenger Transport (representing the bus operators)

Network Rail (rail infrastructure provider)

Bus Users UK (representing bus users' interests)

Passenger Focus (representing rail users' interests) and

Sustrans (the cycling charity)

Sewta welcomes the opportunity to give evidence on future railway infrastructure in Wales. We believe that, together with the Welsh Assembly Government and our Partners, we have established an exemplary planning process, which has successfully been delivering improved rail services for the people of South East Wales for a number of years. However, there is still much more to do.

The Sewta area contains 75% of Wales's rail journeys and with the busiest roads in Wales, Sewta believes that transport investment in South East Wales, and rail investment in particular, should be a high priority for the Welsh Assembly Government. The rail network in the region, especially the Valley Lines into Bridgend, Cardiff and Newport, represents an important asset which can be better utilised to achieve the region's wider social, economic and environmental objectives.

In addition to the well documented growth in passengers on the Valley Lines and Cardiff local routes, all routes in the Sewta region are enjoying high levels of growth - up to 30% on the Chepstow line for example. Even in a recession, the growth appears to be holding up. This high rate of demand growth will result in significant train capacity problems requiring additional network capacity beyond the platform and train lengthening programme, which Sewta's Prioritised Rail Improvement Programme is now helping to deliver. Rail therefore has a vital contribution to make in the continuing development of the Wales Spatial Plan (WSP) and the Regional Transport Plan for South East Wales.

Sewta in its Rail Strategy and Prioritised Rail Improvement Programme (published in 2006 and 2007 respectively) outlined a £200 million package of rail improvements for delivery in the next decade to enable the rail network to double or treble the existing numbers of travellers, particularly commuters into Cardiff and Newport.

With Network Rail and the Welsh Assembly Government, the following infrastructure schemes have been implemented since 2006 in South East Wales, bringing benefits to thousands of passengers:

Llanharan New Station - opened in December 2007;

Ebbw Valley Railway - 6 new stations and an hourly service between Ebbw Vale Parkway and Cardiff - opened late 2007 and recently celebrated its one millionth passenger;

Valley Lines Platform Lengthening - completed December 2009, and;

Merthyr Tydfil half hourly service in May 2008, involving capacity improvements between Pontypridd and Merthyr Tydfil and a new station at Abercynon, with a strategic park and ride facility later in 2011.

However, there remain many more schemes in Sewta's Rail Strategy (summarised below) to be implemented. In 2010, Sewta intends to review its rail strategy to look beyond the current prioritised investment programme. Nonetheless, some schemes have reached the required status within the rail industry's planning process and now await either decisions by WEFO or delivery by WAG as it takes forward its Rail Forward Programme.

Completion of previous Sewta Five Year Rail Strategy

Introduction of half hourly frequencies on the Rhymney and Maesteg lines;

New stations at Energlyn and Brackla;

Improvements to provide increased passenger platform capacity at Cardiff Queen Street;

Measures to accelerate improved reliability and capacity at Bargoed Station (improved signaling and a track run-off), Cogan Junction and on the Treherbert Line;

Re-modelled station at Severn Tunnel Junction; (an additional further platform at the station is being provided by Network Rail as part of the Newport Area Signalling Renewal scheme);

Associated platform lengthening on the Rhymney, Penarth, Treherbert and Maesteg lines;

New rolling stock to meet passenger growth with associated improvements in fleet reliability and passenger experience.

Implementation of Sewta's Prioritised Investment Programme

A programme of improvements to station facilities, access, information, safety and security, car parking and rail link bus services coordinated with the National Stations Improvement Programme;

Additional hourly service between Maesteg to Bridgend (phase 1) and later to Cardiff (phase 2) by provision of new signaling and passing loop on Maesteg branch;

New station at Brackla, Bridgend;

Additional hourly service between Cardiff and Caerphilly, and Cardiff and Pontypridd by provision of two new turnback facilities;

Improved service frequency on Marches Line through provision of new turnback facility at Abergavenny;

A half hourly service on the Vale of Glamorgan line to Bridgend through new crossovers and turnbacks at Barry;

New stations at Llanwern, St Mellons and Coedkernew facilitated by increases in the line speed on the relief lines, and at Caerleon;

Increased train service capacity between Newport and Cardiff, facilitated by relief line speed increase;

Chepstow Line service frequency enhancements facilitated by turnback facility at Chepstow;

Future phases on Ebbw Vale line including extension of line from Ebbw Vale Parkway to new station at Ebbw Vale Town, new crossovers and passing loop to enable additional hourly service between Ebbw Vale and Newport;

New line to Abertillery and additional new stations on Ebbw Vale line at Cwm, Crumlin, Pye Corner and Newport West Central;

Possible reinstatement of Beddau to Cardiff line for passenger use, with new stations at Beddau, Gwaun Meisgyn, Llantrisant and Cross Inn;

Refurbishment or replacement of existing Valley Lines Pacer and Sprinter Fleet, to also take into account possible future electrification of network.

The Case for a high speed rail link between London and South Wales (in addition to the recent announcement that the Great Western Main Line is to be electrified).

In terms of connectivity outside of Wales, Sewta supports improved links between South East Wales and other parts of Wales and the UK, in particular by rail, coach and sea. We believe that a High Speed Rail Line between South East Wales and London will be to the benefit of the region and we are supporting regional efforts to advance the case for early UK government investment in a London - South Wales High Speed Rail route.

Sewta is a member of the Great Western Partnership, comprising the likes of SEWEF (South East Wales Economic Forum), West of England Partnership, South West England local authorities, South West England Regional Development Agency, who have come together to act as an advocate for South Wales and South West England on the High Speed Rail agenda and related issues, policies and projects.

The Great Western Partnership is developing an evidence base regarding the benefits of high speed rail. Contributing to that process, Sewta identifies the benefits as:

Providing revenue gains;

Provision of extra capacity for rail freight;

Reduction in travel times between South Wales and South East England will boost the South East Wales region's ability to compete with other UK regions;

And on a lesser scale, social benefits in terms of rail operators providing a far more extensive range of special discounted travel opportunities for families with children, young people and old age pensioners.

The case for an improved north-south line

Whilst Sewta acknowledges the benefits of reducing journey times and improved frequency of services between South Wales and North Wales / Manchester, Sewta is strongly of the view that this should not be to the detriment of the other communities along the North and West route. In particular, Abergavenny, Pontypool and Cwmbran are key settlements in the WSP, and would benefit from any work to improve the general service between North and South Wales.

It is worth noting that strong passenger growth has been recorded on the Cardiff to Manchester service via the North and West route, and it is our view that any work on improving the north-south line needs to look at the whole package of service enhancements on the Marches line, and expected freight growth on the North and West route.

Notwithstanding a series of infrastructure enhancements on the line, Sewta believes that there exists within the current timetable on the North to South route, time to provide some of the journey time reductions aspired to by WAG between North and South Wales. A detailed review should be undertaken of the current timetable to see if some of the rail industry's performance measures, such as station dwell times and pathing times could be adjusted to free up sufficient time to speed up journeys. Furthermore, removing some of the redundant time in the timetables could be used for some stations, such as Pontypool and New Inn, to be served more frequently than is the case at present.

The north-south line when it reaches South Wales at Abergavenny starts to parallel roads such as the A4042 which are suffering from increasing congestion, but which have no proposals to address such congestion and heavy road use. With the existence of three of the regions 14 key settlements on the line, it is Sewta's view that any improvement on the north-south line has the potential in South East Wales to achieve significant modal shift.

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.

Sewta welcomed the prioritisation given in Network Rail's Electrification Strategy to electrification of the Great Western Main Line through to Swansea. Nonetheless, many of the drivers for electrification for this line equally apply to other rail lines, such as the Valley Lines and Severn Tunnel diversionary route via Gloucester and Chepstow, and Marches and Vale of Glamorgan lines.

One of the reasons for early electrification of the Great Western Main Line is a need to replace the 30 year old plus High Speed Train Fleet. It is worth remembering that ageing diesel trains also operate in South East Wales, such as the Pacers and Sprinters to be found on the Valley Lines network. The oldest of such trains are around 20 years old and are operating at or beyond their optimum operating mileage. Furthermore, the gradients, stopping patterns, and levels of service on the Valley Lines network are not the best operating environment for the Pacers and Sprinter fleet, and have probably shortened their working life.

To this end, one of the policies within Sewta's Rail Strategy is to replace and upgrade the existing Valley Lines fleet. Given their age profile, Arriva Trains Wales' Pacer and Sprinter fleet will be reaching the time for replacement towards the end of this first Wales and Borders franchise, or certainly within the first years of the second franchise period. There is a strong case for the replacement vehicles to be electric, and therefore planning for the electrification of the Valley Lines network (and other South Wales routes) should start now, to allow a synergy with the rolling stock renewal programme.

Sewta notes the benefits of electrification and electric trains in terms of lower operating costs, better reliability figures, lower leasing costs and carbon reduction compared to diesel trains. Furthermore, as is evidenced by the so-called sparks effect with past electrification schemes such as on the East and West Coast Main Lines, a conversion to electric trains bringing with it benefits such as reduced journey times, station ambience, on-train ambience, reliability, and additional seating capacity can bring a significant improvement to the product offered to the railways customers, and encourage more modal shift.

However, we would note caution that if the Great Western Main Line was the only one to be electrified, there is the probability of diesel trains continuing to run "under the wires". If that were so, it would be a situation which, where it exists in other parts of the UK, is often seen as being wasteful and does not allow for the full benefits of electrification to be realised.

A further benefit of electrification can be found with providing synergies when track signaling and other infrastructure are nearing replacement or renewal. Whilst the Cardiff Area and Newport Area Signalling Renewal schemes being delivered by Network Rail will predate any electrification scheme, Sewta has been assured by Network Rail that both schemes have been designed to allow for future electrification.

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)

As part of our review of our Rail Strategy we are proposing to undertake analysis of the potential to look at additional infrastructure improvements beyond those outlined in Network Rail's existing plans - detailed in the Control Period up to 2014 and route utilisation strategy to 2019. Some of those speed upgrades and capacity improvements may fall into work in developing firstly the electrification of the Great Western Main Line to Swansea, and wider expansion of electrification on the UK railway network (i.e. South Wales Valleys.)

A key priority within Sewta's Rail Strategy is our support for previous work by Arriva Trains Wales and WAG to secure new rolling stock. By the end of the Wales and Borders franchise and period of the Wales RUS, some of the rolling stock used in the Sewta region will be at least 30 years old.

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

Sewta recognizes the importance of the Severn Tunnel as a key corridor for rail journeys to Wales, noting that the route is used for 15 percent of all journeys (approximately 4.7 million passenger journeys in total) made to Wales from South West England, London and the South East as stated in the Network Rail Great Western Route Utilisation Strategy. However, the same document also states that the tunnel between Pilning on the English side to Severn Tunnel Junction in Monmouthshire is running at effectively 100% capacity. This lack of spare capacity, and constraints on capacity on the diversionary routes when the Severn Tunnel is closed for normal engineering work, highlights the key role the tunnel plays in providing for the rail connectivity of South Wales as a whole.

We note the commentary from Network Rail regarding the specific cyclical renewal programme to ensure performance and safety is maintained in the Severn Tunnel. Added to the six yearly renewal of track and a detailed civil engineering inspection of the tunnel's infrastructure, this puts strain not only on the tunnel itself, but also the need for the diversionary route via Gloucester to be maintained. Furthermore these risks also strengthen the case for an increase in capacity to be provided for rail services between South East Wales and South West England. Sewta noted for example that the Newport Area Signalling Renewal scheme whilst not increasing capacity, will improve performance on services through the tunnel.

Looking to the future, the plans for a new high speed rail line from London to South Wales will offer a significant opportunity to increase capacity to cross the Severn. If high speed trains were diverted to use whatever new facility is provided, capacity in the Severn Tunnel will be freed up, albeit with the ongoing need to maintain the specific renewal and track inspection programmes, and be used to increase the level of frequency of regional services. One beneficiary being the Cardiff to Bristol and Portsmouth service which has been experiencing significant levels of passenger growth in the past 5 years.

Further use of light rail in urban areas

Sewta has acknowledged the potential for light rail to be explored as a form of transport, notably around the Cardiff area on the City Line via Fairwater and Danescourt, Coryton line via Whitchurch, and Beddau to Llantrisant line. Proposals have been made in the past to convert the whole of the Valleys Line network to light rail, and whilst the benefits of light rail lessen the greater the distance is travelled, there has been recent work undertaken by Network Rail on behalf of Cardiff Council to examine the potential for light rail in and around the Cardiff area. We look forward to receiving the conclusions of this work.

We do however note that many commentators suggest the full benefit of light rail is not realised unless the vehicles can run on streets through parts of the urban areas. If that were not to happen, then heavy rail services should continue to operate.

The case for new stations and new/reopened lines

Sewta has significant experience of the benefits of new stations and reopening of disused railway lines, as illustrated by the examples of Llanharan on the main line, Vale of Glamorgan and Ebbw Vale lines - the latter celebrating its one millionth passenger in just over a year of operation.

To that end, the Sewta Rail Strategy review will provide an opportunity to further consider the case for restoring passenger services to other former passenger lines. While the scope of the review is still under discussion, Sewta welcomes the statement from the Welsh Assembly Government for a feasibility study to look at restoration of passenger services on the Aberdare to Hirwaun rail line.

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

In its Regional Transport Plan, Sewta acknowledges the vital role of freight transport. The efficient, sustainable movement of freight is vital for the continuing economic development of South East Wales. Sewta continues to contribute to the development of the Wales Freight Strategy. We are mindful of the need to maintain a balance between freight and passenger on rail to ensure freight is afforded appropriate priority. To this end, Sewta has adopted a number of policies regarding rail and freight as follows:

Ensuring wherever possible the servicing of industrial development and mineral extraction is undertaken by rail. We do recognise that if planning authorities make rail use compulsory, this renders any scheme ineligible for freight infrastructure facilities grants.

In acknowledging the need for freight to be moved in the most effective way, more attention is required for freight interchanges.

Although the identification of good freight interchange sites is a major challenge, as much freight movement is driven by the commercial sector needs rather than being able to be planned. Sewta local authorities have been asked for such sites to be identified through the Local Development Plan process.

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

Sewta would record the successful implementation of many elements in its Rail Strategy and Prioritised Investment Programme, as evidence of the current strong working relationships Sewta has with the Welsh Assembly Government and the rail industry on delivery of rail improvements throughout Wales.

Sewta's role in the future planning of railways as part of the Regional Transport Plan has been confirmed, to identify further rail enhancements, and oversee the feasibility and business case development processes up to the Network Rail project stage of GRIP 3. Beyond that stage, which is the identification of a single option, the Welsh Assembly Government, with support from Sewta, will progress the scheme implementation.

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

Sewta does not have a formal position on the powers available to the Welsh Assembly Government, and would emphasise that the existing arrangements available to the Welsh Assembly government have seen a number of railway infrastructure projects funded, and implemented in Wales. However, the following comments are important to note.

When the Welsh Assembly Government took responsibility for some rail activities Sewta expressed concerns that the level of funding allocated to the Assembly would be sufficient only to maintain the existing service levels and would not allow improvements to be procured. There are concerns that this may still be the case.

Furthermore, there are a number of cases where the level of powers and influence the Assembly Government has on the type and level of rail services that operate from England which have been to the detriment of rail passengers in Wales. The termination of the 1515 First Great Western service from Paddington to Swansea, the specification of Cross Country services stopping at stations on the Chepstow line, withdrawal of key commuter services between Cardiff and Bristol as part of the Greater Western franchise, and the lack of an opportunity for the Assembly specify that the Central franchise should run beyond Cardiff to serve Cardiff International Airport are four such examples. If these issues had been resolved when the respective franchises were let, it is likely that it could have been achieved cheaper than as an add-on after rolling stock and staffing had been determined.

Similarly, since privatisation, Welsh rail services in south east Wales have lost the variety of destinations previously enjoyed and now require at least one change of train to leave or return Wales. While services leaving Wales are operated on a broadly clockface standard pattern, the return services tend to be bunched and by being so, cause congestion on the South Wales Main Line which precludes the ability to run additional services.

Another key assumption would be that if the Assembly Government was given additional powers and associated funding, it would generate opportunities to make the service better. The experience in Scotland, with the additional investment in the rail network that has been enjoyed, would suggest that Wales would reap similar benefits if the Assembly Government had greater powers over rail services such as those enjoyed in Scotland. However, Wales enjoys a significant degree of cross-border travel (particularly relevant in South East Wales) with some 32% of Welsh rail journeys are cross-border (i.e. running into England).

With any increase in powers, it would be important to ensure that the interests of passengers in Wales were still represented for relevant rail projects in England (e.g. Swindon-Kemble redoubling, electrification of Great Western Main Line, IEP). Thus Sewta would support the Assembly Government in securing additional powers to the same degree as Scotland and with influence over the provision of railway infrastructure projects in England, which have a key impact on journeys coming into, and in Wales, and the timetabling of services originating in England which terminate in Wales.