

# **Enterprise and Learning Committee**

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## **National Assembly for Wales Enterprise and Learning Committee Inquiry on Future Railway Infrastructure in Wales.**

### **Submission from Trafnidiaeth Canolbarth Cymru (TraCC), November 2009.**

#### **Purpose**

This paper is submitted as evidence to inform the Enterprise and Learning Committee on the future strategy for developing an improved railway infrastructure for Wales.

#### **Background**

Trafnidiaeth Canolbarth Cymru (TraCC) is the local authority Regional Transport Consortium for Mid Wales and is a voluntary partnership between Ceredigion, Gwynedd and Powys. TraCC very much welcomes the opportunity to provide evidence to the Committee on a subject that has for some time been discussed in Mid Wales.

Previous submission of evidence to this Committee has been focussed on demonstrating the need to seek improvements to the frequency and quality of rail services largely on existing infrastructure but with a longer term view which should look beyond references to rail programme proposals in the Welsh Assembly Government's National Transport Plan (NTP) Consultation Draft which although welcomed, (notably the stated commitment to provide an hourly passenger service on the Cambrian Main Line by 2011) are very limited in terms of planning for providing future infrastructure which itself will be influenced by aspirations for better passenger and freight-carrying services.

Mainline railways running within or connecting to/ from Mid Wales are:

- Cambrian Main Line – Aberystwyth to Shrewsbury;
- Cambrian Coast Line – Dyfi Junction to Pwllheli;
- Heart of Wales Line – Swansea/ Llanelli to Shrewsbury; and
- Conwy Valley Line – Blaenau Ffestiniog to Llandudno Junction.

TraCC has agreed with Taith that it will lead on identifying improvements to the Cambrian Coast Line and Taith will focus on improvements to the Conwy Valley Line (Blaenau Ffestiniog being in the TraCC area). TraCC has also agreed to lead on developing proposals for the Heart of Wales Line on behalf of SWWITCH.

The TraCC Regional Transport Plan (RTP) identifies the need to invest in passenger transport (rail, buses and community-based transport) to improve sustainable access to services and opportunities for people living in or visiting Mid Wales. The RTP (submitted to the Welsh Assembly Government at the end of September 2009) attempts to put Mid Wales at the 'Heart of Transport in Wales' and seeks Capital funding for a number of key improvements to improve access by all modes of travel to rail services. In Year Two (2011/12) of the TraCC RTP it is proposed to undertake a study into the opportunities for a new intra-Wales rail link (identification of benefits, early examination of potential market, outline business case and possible route options to be explored further).

TraCC has developed an effective Regional Rail Partnership which includes representatives of the three Mid Wales local authorities, Network Rail, Arriva Trains Wales, Shropshire Council, Passenger Focus, Freight Group and community rail partnerships. During this financial year, TraCC has engaged consultants to undertake a comprehensive rail study to

identify ways to maximise the use of existing (or soon to be completed) infrastructure, whilst improving access to rail services through better interchange (car and cycle parking, waiting facilities, walking routes to stations and better integration between bus and rail services). The TraCC RTP Preparatory work is also focussing on improving interchange between various forms of passenger transport and a Sustainable Travel Area proposal for Aberystwyth.

### **Terms of Reference**

In terms of commenting on the specific Terms of Reference of this Inquiry, TraCC would wish to make the following submission.

### **The case for a high speed rail link between London and South Wales**

TraCC would very much support the case for a high speed rail link between South Wales and London as it would offer improved journey times particularly for residents of southern Powys and Ceredigion who most likely to use this service. The electrified/High speed upgrade must be looked at as a one-off opportunity not only to regenerate the South Wales corridor but also to spread prosperity further West and North.

It is essential that any links are extended at least as far as Swansea, improving the city's connectivity and that of West and Mid Wales. Improved parking capacity at rail stations will be required alongside, frequent and reliable train connections, improved service frequencies and interchange facilities of local and longer distance (TrawsCambria) buses to connect with rail.

There is an opportunity to develop the potential of the Heart of Wales Line as a far more important transport link than it is at present. It should now be looked at as possibly a far more important feeder line with regular services, into the high speed/electrified terminus that Swansea is intended to become.

### **The case for an improved north-south line**

Two options should be considered for 'an improved north-south line'. The first (shorter term) consideration (which has received most attention to date) is improving capacity and capability of the existing 'north-south' rail infrastructure and improving service frequency and quality along the Marches Line. It is however essential to people travelling to/ from Mid Wales that there is improved connectivity between services to/ from the Cambrian Lines and Heart of Wales Line so as to offer improved journey times. These could partly be achieved in the shorter term through timetabling improvements. From 2011 it is anticipated that the hourly service on the Cambrian Mainline will improve connectivity and reduce journeys times (less time waiting for connections in Shrewsbury). The continued value of the Marches Line to rail travel to/ from Wales is not disputed and improvements to stations, signalling and service frequencies is very important.

In the longer term there are at least two possible options to be considered for providing improved North-South rail journeys running entirely within Wales by linking up sections of existing line with sections of new. These are:

- Western option – a continuous rail line running down the western side of Wales to re-link Aberystwyth with destinations in the South and North of the country. Not all of the former route between Aberystwyth and Carmarthen may still be suitable (sections now in private ownership and the need for faster journey times than was previously the case) and one suggestion may be to follow the old route (where possible) to Lampeter and then construct a completely new section of line from Lampeter to join the Heart of Wales Line at Llandeilo. This would allow the new section (approx. 20 miles) to be constructed to allow travel up to 90mph, reducing

travel time considerably. The end destination in this case may be Swansea rather than Carmarthen linking up with the high speed line. At the southern end of this proposal the expanded Heart of Wales Line section from Llandeilo to Swansea/Llanelli would offer far more opportunities for frequent trains for both commuters and leisure users. This fits well with any proposals for electrification of the South Wales main line. In addition the utilisation of the District line (around Swansea) could allow for trains from the North to be diverted towards Cardiff direct.

- **Eastern option** - building on the dismantled line between Moat Lane (near Caersws) and Builth Road, on the Heart of Wales line. This would connect the Cambrian Lines to the Heart of Wales line by-passing Shrewsbury and allowing trains to be pathed to Llanelli/Swansea from the West. As indicated above there are many sections on this route also that have been built over since it was closed and new solutions would have to be found to overcome these. In conjunction with these improvements Pinch points on the Heart of Wales would have to be removed to allow most available rolling stock to use the line and as such maximising the use of the line.

### **The case for electrification of other railway lines in Wales**

Again TraCC would support the electrification of other railway lines in Wales as they would benefit travel to/ from Wales as long as there is connectivity with services operating from Mid Wales. The same is true of electrification of routes through the English West Midlands. It is important for the future that the benefits of electrification are considered for the whole of the UK rail network. There are clear environmental benefits to electrification (CO<sub>2</sub> reduction) and this is as appropriate to rural rail routes as it is to urban sections.

### **The need for speed upgrades and capacity improvements across the network**

The Heart of Wales Line from Craven Arms to Llanelli (Bynea jct) is under utilised. It is presently limited to using type 153 and Type 150 rolling stock. Network Rail state that two station locations, alterations are required to the platform edges to allow 158 units to operate. This work will allow existing 158 units or other rolling stock that may be introduced in the next 10 to 20 years to operate. Some existing Manchester-Swansea-Carmarthen trains could then use the line on a very limited stop timetable, freeing up much needed paths on the Marches line, while also providing a more direct line to Swansea and the West. Removal of a number of railway crossings will increase line speeds and a 'circular' pattern of service could be established and with more investment and sections of connecting new lines added, the Line could become pivotal in providing much needed and increased capacity joining North and South.

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

It is imperative for the future proofing of the South Wales main line that the Severn tunnel be maintained to a degree where interruptions are kept to a minimum. The electrification of the line would raise expectations of greater reliability and less disruption. Provision for both Rail and Road should be part of any estuary crossing (linked to power generation) between the South Wales Coast and the West of England. This would help to provide a 'seven day railway' to and from South Wales, reducing the need for passengers and freight to use diversionary routes.

### **Further use of light rail in urban areas**

TraCC understands that there is a case for light rail solutions (tram, guided bus or similar) in urban areas or areas where such a system can provide a link to an urban centre from its more rural hinterland. There are clear benefits to be had in tackling traffic congestion (modal shift from cars) and providing new passenger transport opportunities where none existed before. A limited light rail solution could apply in Aberystwyth and consideration will be given to this within the context of a Sustainable Travel Area. There may also be a

case for light rail in other areas of Mid Wales utilising dismantled railway track beds or currently 'mothballed' sections of track.

### **The case for new stations and new/reopened lines**

Looking beyond the immediate need to improve existing railway stations, TraCC has responded positively to the campaign by Carno Station Action Group to complete the WelTAG Stage One appraisal for re-opening the previously closed railway station at Carno in Powys. This piece of work will assist the Welsh Assembly Government in determining whether the proposal is to be taken forward in their Rail Forward Programme. TraCC is also aware that there are arguments for reopening other stations on the Cambrian Main Line (Bow Street and Abermule) and that this may also apply to stations on the Heart of Wales and Cambrian Coast Lines.

Similarly, changes in demographics, travel patterns, environmental awareness and changes in the focus of Government policy, should now influence thinking with respect to previously closed railway lines and 'missing links' in the Welsh rail network. The suggestions regarding a North-South rail route within Wales (discussed above) could be considered within this context. TraCC is also supportive of the proposal to re-open the 'mothballed' Trawsfynydd to Blaenau Ffestiniog line for passengers and freight to transfer intermediate level nuclear waste from Trawsfynydd Nuclear power Station. TraCC also recognises and supports cases for reopening previously closed sections of railway lines such as from Oswestry (from the Marches Line at Gobowen) possibly extending into Llanymynech and beyond.

There is an additional need now to begin to address the forecast impact of climate change upon the existing rail network in Wales. This will involve future-proofing current infrastructure (such as raising or diverting track beds) and will require close rail industry cooperation and targeted funding.

### **Increase the use of the railways for freight, including freight transfer facilities**

The development of increased freight on rail is constrained by the limited network available. The cost of transferring freight from road is (or is perceived to be) too high. Limited access to the network and uncertainty in the timings of movements lead many manufacturers and suppliers away from rail. There is a need to influence the market (whether by persuasion or legislation) and to identify possible locations for rail freight facilities and demonstrate a case for mixed freight – possibly local authority waste transfer, supermarket/ retail goods, aggregates, diary products, mail and parcels, timber, fuels and other commodities.

There might also be an opportunity to transport wind turbine components into Mid Wales for local assembly and onward transporting by road to the wind farms planned in the region. With largely unsuitable roads and consideration of the social and environmental impact of transporting these components by road, rail could be a realistic option. Development of this proposal would lead to natural selection of strategically-located freight transfer facilities adjacent to road and rail infrastructure.

### **Role of the Welsh Government, Regional Transport Consortia and RTPs**

Under present arrangements, local authority regional consortia are well-placed to bring forward the concerns and aspirations of local communities so as to influence future planning. Subject to the availability of funding, the TraCC Regional Transport Plan Five Year Capital Programme seeks to improve passenger interchange facilities at a number of existing railway stations and improve walking, cycling and passenger transport access to rail services. TraCC is also working in partnership with Network Rail, Arriva Trains Wales

and the Assembly Government to deliver the National Stations Improvement Programme (NSIP).

It is important that partnerships are effective to ensure that the rail industry works with government for the benefit of local communities and businesses. TraCC has recognised the need for effective collaboration by establishing its own Regional Rail Partnership and investing funding into developing a rail strategy and associated studies and research work. There is a clear need for the rail industry (train operators, freight operating companies, Network Rail) to engage with and respond to the priorities set by national and local government.

In Wales, the National Assembly and Assembly Government have key future railway planning roles – to set the political agenda and to plan for and secure funding for improvements across Wales through the National Transport Plan (NTP) Rail Forward Programme that reflects local/ regional transport objectives and aspirations. Proposals to strengthen partnership working arrangements and clarify respective roles for future transport planning and delivery would be welcomed provided that they retain local accountability.

### **Welsh Government additional powers and associated funding**

At present all infrastructure on the network is the responsibility of Network Rail, whose focus is inevitably UK-wide and predominately on larger projects located on main corridors and more heavily-used networks. It should be recognised that the rail network in Wales is linked to the rest of the UK but has its own unique pattern of use and potential which requires attention.

There are a number of options that might lead to a greater focus on investment in Wales which may include the transfer of rail planning powers from the UK Department for Transport to the Welsh Government and this will require greater influence over Network Rail operations in Wales, mirroring arrangements that exist in Scotland. Included within this arrangement would be the powers to promote and develop new lines where they serve primarily the people of Wales and lie within Wales.

Seeking additional powers would appear to be a logical step provided that associated funding is made to Wales and there is sufficient capacity both in knowledge and skills at a national and regional level to undertake an enhanced role. Availability and equitable distribution of Government funding for rail investments will also be a key issue to address within Wales to ensure equity of distribution across the nation and influenced by local/ regional input. Over the next thirty years, the Welsh Assembly must develop a clear vision of the network and levels of service that would benefit Wales economically and socially as well as addressing major environmental issues to be faced in the future.