

Cynulliad Cenedlaethol Cymru	National Assembly for Wales
Pwyllgor yr Economi, Seilwaith a Sgiliau	Economy, Infrastructure and Skills Committee
Blaenoriaethau ar gyfer Pwyllgor yr Economi, Seilwaith a Sgiliau	Priorities for the Economy, Infrastructure and Skills Committee
EIS 08 Y Brifysgol Agored yng Nghymru	EIS 08 Traws Link Cymru

Reopening of the railway line between Carmarthen and Aberystwyth.

A Follow-up proposal to the Assembly's Economy, Infrastructure and Skills Committee from Traws Link Cymru (West Wales Rail Campaign)

The 56.5 mile-long railway line from Carmarthen to Aberystwyth was closed in January 1965 as part of the programme of cuts proposed by Dr Richard Beeching in his report *The Reshaping of Britain's Railways*. The cuts were especially severe in west Wales, with the closure not only of the Carmarthen to Aberystwyth line, but also the Afon Wen to Bangor railway line (26.5 miles) in Gwynedd. This meant that it was now impossible to travel by train from the south of Wales to the north without crossing the border into England.

The closure of the railway left a major gap in the transport network of southwest Wales, for there was no trunk road to carry the traffic between Aberystwyth, Carmarthen and the Swansea conurbation. Over the past 50 years, the situation has deteriorated even further. Road traffic on the already inadequate road network has increased, and traffic congestion into towns such as Aberystwyth and Carmarthen has become a recurrent problem. There has been a marked increase in heavy road vehicles, both large commercial and delivery vehicles, as well as timber lorries. The last-named are becoming especially problematical as they are frequently coupled lorries and trailers and for motorists are a driving hazard. Apart from the construction of the Carmarthen bypass (A40), there have been relatively few major road upgrades. Road safety figures show that Carmarthenshire has one of the worst road accident records of any county in Wales, and the roads are all graded either medium- or medium/high-risk in terms of driving safety by the Road Safety Foundation (2014). Efforts to reduce accidents, for example by imposing ever more stringent speed limits and traffic-calming measures, do not seem to have solved the problem. Indeed, these are a source of increasing frustration for motorists, particularly on the A485 from Carmarthen to Lampeter which is now widely regarded as one of the most difficult driving roads in west Wales

Attempts have been made to improve the regional bus services, most notably with the introduction of the T1 service from Aberystwyth to Carmarthen and which, in its first year of operation (2015), carried almost a quarter of a million passengers. While these figures clearly demonstrate that there is a demand for public transport in the area, they do little to alleviate the traffic problem, for the buses have to use the same inadequate roads as other private and commercial vehicles, and so they effectively add to, rather than reduce, current traffic difficulties. In addition, they contribute significantly to the increasing carbon footprint from road traffic. Figures from DEFRA (2011) show that, on average, buses emit around 150 gm CO₂ per passenger km while petrol cars emit 208 gm CO₂ per passenger km. National rail trains emit, on average, 56 gm CO₂ per passenger km. This means that bus travel is almost three times more environmentally damaging than rail transport, while a car journey with one person is approximately four times more damaging.

It is often stated that there is little or no demand for rail transport. However, figures from the Office of Rail and Road show quite clearly that demand for rail transport is increasing, with the number of passenger/km travelled annually across Britain now at the highest level for 60 years. Indeed, over 300,000 passengers per year used Aberystwyth station in 2014/15, a 26% increase over the previous 10 years, while Carmarthen now has more than 400,000 passengers per year, an increase over the same period of almost 50%. It is also the case that across Britain, passenger numbers

have risen significantly in rural areas; this reflects the social as well as economic role of the railways, and is an acknowledgement that it is now not reasonable to expect all costs to be met from fares, as was the case in the Beeching era.

The benefits of reopening the rail link between Carmarthen and Aberystwyth (and, in due course, the Afon Wen to Bangor connection) are considerable. This would provide a rail corridor connecting north, mid, west and southwest Wales within an inter-regional transport network. It would provide a direct rail link from Aberystwyth to Cardiff and would reduce the rail journey time (via Shrewsbury) by more than an hour. It would offer an alternative to private travel, and a more socially-inclusive form of transport. Rail services would be integrated closely with the bus services, enabling further investment in the latter to operate as feeder links from more outlying communities to the railway line. It would provide a major boost to the regional economy, bringing enhanced commuting potential; would contribute significantly to the economic infrastructure of west Wales, especially during the period of construction; and would be an option for freight transport. It would also be a major boost to the tourist industry. Finally it would be a much safer and more environmentally-friendly mode of transport.

The population of west Wales is not large, but the catchment for the railway line (Ceredigion and Carmarthen) is, nevertheless, over 250,000. Moreover, as the line would connect four university campuses (Aberystwyth, Lampeter, Carmarthen and Swansea), there are almost 40,000 potential student passengers. The line would also link five hospitals (in Aberystwyth, Carmarthen, Llanelli, Swansea and Morriston). The campaign to reopen the line has the backing of both the universities and the Health Boards, as well as the County Councils, Town and Community Councils, a range of community groups (e.g. One Voice Wales; Cymdeithas yr Iaith Gymraeg), and a substantial number of Assembly Members and Westminster MPs. The petition in support of reopening the line now has more than 14,000 signatures.

In May of last year, the then Minister for Science, Economy and Transport, Edwina Hart, commissioned a Scoping Study into the reopening of the line; this was conducted by the consultants AECOM who reported in December 2015. Following publication of the Study, the Minister agreed to conduct a WelTAG assessment in advance of a full Feasibility Study, and workshops involving a range of user groups and potential stakeholders have subsequently been convened in Aberystwyth and in Lampeter. The WelTAG assessment is being undertaken by the consultancy firm ARCADIS, and will report to the Cabinet Secretary by the end of August. The Scoping Study gave an indicative cost for reopening the line of up to £750m. While substantial, this compares favourably with money allocated in recent years for road-building in Wales (Tenby Bypass: 8km - £68m; Port Talbot Harbour Way: 4.7 km - £107m; A465 Heads of the Valleys upgrade: £800m+; M4 Newport upgrade: £1 bn+).

The proposed reopening of the Carmarthen to Aberystwyth rail link is fully in line with the Assembly Government's Transport Strategy for Wales (*The Wales Transport Strategy*, 2008). In particular, it would be a key element in enhancing connectivity (one of the major aims of the Strategy) in west Wales, and would contribute to the delivery of the long-term outcomes in the social, economic and environmental agendas that are core elements of the Strategy document (pg iii). The reopening the railway would also help to meet many of the aspirations of the Welsh Government as set out in the *Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act*, 2015, most notably in terms of its contribution to a more prosperous Wales, a more resilient Wales (in terms of environmental awareness and sustainability), a more equal Wales, and a Wales of cohesive communities.

In conclusion, Traws Link Cymru is firmly of the view that the reopening of the Carmarthen to Aberystwyth rail link would bring considerable social, economic, cultural and environmental benefits to west Wales, which remains one of the most deprived areas of the United Kingdom as reflected, for example, by the exceptionally low GVA per head of west Wales on a UK and European level. We warmly commend this proposal to the Assembly's Economy, Infrastructure and Skills

Committee, and hope that the Carmarthen to Aberystwyth rail link will be included as one of the priorities for its Forward Work.

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