

Cynulliad Cenedlaethol Cymru / National Assembly for Wales

Pwyllgor yr Economi, Seilwaith a Sgiliau/ Economy, Infrastructure and Skills Committee

Masnachfaint Rheilffyrdd a chyflwyno Metro / Rail Franchise and the Metro

Ymateb gan Grŵp Defnyddwyr Rheilffyrdd Gogledd Sir Gaer / Evidence from North Cheshire Rail Users' Group

NCRUG are pleased to have been given the opportunity to submit their comments against the above inquiry.

We should preface our remarks by stating that we attended the Rail Summit promoted by the North Wales Economic Ambition Board, (NWEAB), in Llandudno on 12th November 2015. This event left us with the clear message that future rail infrastructure enhancements in Wales should ignore political, geographical and national boundaries if the economic and social benefits of the 'Northern Powerhouse' and 'Transport for the North' initiatives are to be realised. We heartily agree with this philosophy; our campaign to re-open the Halton curve to bi-directional traffic has been our main project for many years and the connectivity of North East Wales and the North Wales Coast to Merseyside, including Liverpool Airport, has played a significant part in building the Business Case for Halton curve re-instatement.

The importance of the recognition that the economy of Wrexham and North East Wales is strongly orientated towards Merseyside, is an important first step towards promoting growth in both areas, provided the infrastructure reflects this fact. Likewise the North Wales Coast, and easy access to Liverpool Airport, with its preponderance of budget airlines, presents an ideal opportunity to expand tourism.

Borderlands Line:- In addition we are supportive of improvements in both service and infrastructure on the Wrexham to Bidston line. Better connectivity at Shotton High and Low level stations and a new Deeside Parkway station would be a vital first step in progressing the synergy which exists in the economies of North and East Wales and Merseyside and the whole area covered by Transport for the North, especially when the Halton curve is opened. A half hourly service would greatly improve connectivity at both Shotton and Wrexham and open up rail travel opportunities to south Liverpool and the Liverpool Airport.

Saltney/Rossett redoubling:- The re-doubling of the Chester/Wrexham line between Saltney Junction and Rossett is welcomed and is further proof of the need to increase capacity on this line not only to benefit Holyhead/Cardiff services but also, and perhaps more importantly, to allow new services northwards from Wrexham to Merseyside and Liverpool Airport via the Halton curve. Re-doubling of the rest of this line, south of Rossett, should be considered for urgent execution in CP6, if not earlier, in order to realise the full potential of this line in developing economic growth in the Wrexham area. The new prison on Wrexham Industrial Estate is due to open this year. Easy public transport to/from the prison is essential to dissuade the use of cars and the congestion and pollution which follow.

In addition to the prison, we understand, there are approximately 7000 employed on Wrexham Industrial Estate many of whom could be persuaded to use rail and a dedicated bus either from Wrexham General or from a new station at Bradley. This would allow a direct and dedicated bus service to access the Trading Estate via the A5156/A534 and thus avoid the town centre.

Electrification:- Whilst some less expensive schemes for smaller gains should not be dismissed or delayed, there is no doubt that electrification of Holyhead to Crewe, Runcorn, (via Halton curve), and Warrington are essential if the full benefits of the Northern Powerhouse and HS2 initiatives are to be gained.

Not only will line speeds and dwell times be improved, thereby giving faster journey times and improved connectivity, but rolling stock and infrastructure maintenance costs and pollution will also be reduced.

Electrification of the North Wales Coast Main line would present an ideal opportunity to re-instate sections of four tracking and passing loops to increase capacity and allow freight movements from Holyhead to be developed thus relieving the congestion on the A55 Trunk Road, (see our comments on 'Freight' below).

HS2:- It is essential that Welsh infrastructure and services are designed in such a way as to exploit the advantages which will be available when HS2 reaches Crewe. Classic Compatible rolling stock would permit through running to London and the West Midlands without having to make connections.

It is important, therefore, that steps be taken to ensure Classic Compatible stock can run through to Holyhead and Wrexham with any necessary gauge enhancements and track layouts undertaken before the arrival of HS2 at Crewe.

Northern Powerhouse:- The opening of the Halton Curve in December 2018 and future electrification from Chester to Warrington Bank Quay and to Halton Junction will provide the vital links required to connect North and East Wales to the Northern Powerhouse area thereby promoting growth throughout Wales and northern England.

The Welsh Assembly Government and its Agencies should maintain constant discussion with Transport for the North in order that the full economic benefits of close integration of rail infrastructure and services permeate throughout the whole of Wales, particularly North Wales, and the north of England.

Overcrowding:-

For a number of years NCRUG have witnessed a huge increase in passenger numbers on the Chester/Warrington Bank Quay/Manchester service. This has led to extensive overcrowding on peak trains, (usually three cars), and is now also progressing into off peak services.

To remedy this we suggest a ½ hourly instead of the current 1 hourly service.

Connectivity:- This is a most important consideration as poor connectivity can be a barrier to rail travel and thereby have an adverse effect on economic and social growth. Conversely good connectivity encourages rail travel and helps to influence modal shift from road to rail. This, in turn, improves the environment and reduces congestion on the road system, particularly the A55 Holyhead/Chester Trunk road, which is often subject to lengthy delays.

We are concerned that the new Wales & Borders franchise and the possible advent of partial electrification, could lead, at least temporarily, to existing services, such as Manchester/Llandudno, being truncated at Chester. We would strongly advocate that this well used and profitable service be maintained as a through service between Manchester and Llandudno without the burden of changing at Chester.

Freight: - The A55 Trunk Road is the main artery for freight traffic to and from Ireland and the UK and Continental Motorway networks. Consideration should be given to transferring much of this traffic to rail. Facilities at Holyhead need to permit easy transfer of container traffic from and to the ferry from a rail terminal. To the best of our knowledge such facilities do not currently exist at Holyhead although, in the past, such facilities did exist.

The rail infrastructure will require enhancement by provision of passing loops and some four tracking using existing alignments which, in turn, will require enhancement to bring them up to present day standards.

Looking ahead to the opening of HS2 it should be noted that this will be built to Berne Gauge standard thus permitting whole trailers, without tractors, to be loaded onto special low-loader wagons. This method is widely used on the Continent and helps to reduce HGV movements. Whilst current plans for HS2 do not include freight movements this could change, particularly as HS1 does accommodate freight to and from the Continent as far as Barking.

Considerable work was done in the 1990's by the 'Piggy-back Consortium' to develop the transport of trailers, (plus containers) by rail on specially designed low-loader wagons but this was not pursued. It may be time to re-consider this concept as a way of relieving HGV congestion on our roads.

New Opportunities:-

Liverpool John Lennon Airport is particularly relevant to the North Wales coast tourists attractions. Budget Airlines offer unique opportunities for expanding tourism in the area for both long weekend visits from the near Continent and longer week or fortnightly stays from further afield. Tourism in North Wales employs considerable numbers of EU workers which could generate more demand for home visits once Halton Curve opens up direct travel to Liverpool Airport.

Business travel to/from North and North East Wales is hampered by the lack of rail connections to both Liverpool and Manchester Airports. Whilst recently the current franchise does allow through rail travel from the North Wales coast to Manchester Airport there is no opportunity to connect with Liverpool South Parkway and on to Liverpool Airport. However, this will change with the opening of the Halton Curve in December 2018.

We hope you find our comments useful and would be grateful if you would keep us informed on future developments and consultations.

Cedric Green, 17/02/2017