

Cynulliad Cenedlaethol Cymru / National Assembly for Wales

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

Masnachfrait Rheilffyrdd a chyflwyno Metro / Rail Franchise and the Metro

Ymateb ychwanegol gan Ian Slater / Additional evidence from Ian Slater

Many thanks to the Committee for the invitation, help and welcome to the meetings on Thursday last, particularly Robert Lloyd-Williams for explaining matters to me. It was a very positive experience, although I do understand that the difficult part will be when the Assembly Government has to decide priorities within the constraints of finance and the scope of devolution.

Mr George, Chair, told us that further comments would still be welcome after the meeting so I thought I would jot down certain very strong impressions I was left with at the conclusion. These are MY impressions rather than those of the group (Leominster Rail Users) that I represented, but I doubt there would be much, if any, dissent from other of our members.

Firstly, the economic viability of routes should be pursued by growing passenger numbers and making full use of resources rather than by cutting services or raising fares. The rapid growth of passenger numbers in recent years has been testimony to the truth of this, and governments seem always to underestimate the growth of rail travel - so growth potential is throttled. Railways cost a lot to build and maintain, but they exist and the more use that is made of them, the lower the unit cost per passenger and therefore the higher the overall cost-benefit.

The more who travel, the higher the service frequency can be and the more attractive it becomes - a virtuous circle which, incidentally contrasts with private transport where more travelling usually make things worse for everyone! The virtuous circle also extends to services on trains and at stations: more use facilitates the viability of on-board and at-station catering, toilets, staff-assistance, bookstalls etc. to the benefit of all.

Secondly, this is threatened by a severe shortage of trains suitable for virtually all of the services in the franchise. I gathered that this was pointed out to the UK government a few years back but their response was that stock would be cascaded from the then ambitious electrification programme. Now the latter has been stopped, this argument no longer has any credibility and it is important to seek funding for new trains from Westminster OVER AND ABOVE the devolved franchise budget. The "cascading" argument never had much validity anyway as the to-be displaced Turbostar diesel units were largely committed to other operators. Furthermore, most existing Wales & Borders units are elderly and many will soon need considerable refurbishment or replacement.

Thirdly, facilities at stations also need to be considered so that they do not discourage passenger growth. Improved car parking is vital particularly in rural and outer suburban locations in order to attract a large proportion of the population. Ticketing is a major problem with several aspects. Buying them is getting more difficult, not less, as ticket offices are closed and run down before satisfactory alternatives are in place. Online purchasing and automatic machines would be fine if they were backed up by the ability to print tickets at home to be read on machines or if there were to be a national roll-out of compatible systems, but the early initiatives such as London's Oyster Card / App. and the QR readers I used at Cardiff last Saturday are very different. All journey-specific tickets are now mechanically printed, so they should display the relevant valid routes and times that the ticket is available, these are a mystery to all of us but can incur severe penalties if misunderstood. Ticket barriers can be a retrograde step at most stations as they split stations from the community they serve and mean that facilities like cafes and bookstalls can only be accessed from one side of them.

Finally, much is made of the considerable investments that have been made in the rail industry in recent years. Unfortunately, much of this has produced little evident benefit to the travelling public. New trains have been supplied to routes with good stock already (East Coast Mainline, London to Norwich etc.) rather than the "provincial" services such as ours. Station rebuildings have too often produced little or no benefit at great expense, for instance: Newport is worse than before for city centre access, changing trains and integration of facilities.

Birmingham New Street has almost disappeared under a shopping development and is far more difficult to use than previously, with no central waiting area or structure of platforms or facilities.

I wish the committee well in their work, and hope that the Assembly Government, Transport for Wales and the New Wales and Borders franchise can achieve the improvements we all hope for,