

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 gan Rhydian Mason - Swyddog Datblygu Rheilffyrdd Partneriaeth Rheilffordd y Cambrian / Evidence from Rhydian Mason - The Cambrian Railways Partnership's Rail Development Officer

I am rather concerned that this response may sound rather cynical, or negative. However, I believe that you deserve an honest response, and that there is little point in guilting the lilly!

The current opinion of the Rail Development Officer (RDO) of the Cambrian Railways Partnership (CRP), who has been involved in some aspects of the process thus far is that the process to date has been far from clear, with concerns being raised to the RDO in terms of the level of detail that can be discussed as part of ongoing discussions between the 4 bidders and stakeholder groups. These concerns and confusion surrounding confidentiality and sensitivity of information have emerged mainly from the bidders themselves, some of whom have indicated a high degree of confusion and little clarity emerging from the franchise team at Welsh Government. It is also apparent that there is some ambiguity concerning the 'rules of engagement' that arise from a strained relationship between WG and DfT concerning the devolved (or not) nature of rail in Wales & the Borders.

The CRP RDO represents areas in both Wales and the Borders, and thus far there seems to be confusion and ambiguity again about how the Welsh Government engages or consults with customers living outside Wales that rely on the Wales & Borders rail services. Again, there is an issue here to be resolved between WG and DfT which seems to be clouding the real objective of providing a modern, up to date rail service for Wales **AND** Borders areas.

As the RDO of a community rail partnership, there are also concerns that the whole ethos of Community Rail is not being taken seriously by the Welsh Government /TfW for the forthcoming franchise. During the current franchise, Community Rail was notable by it's absence, and it fell to the good will of local authorities and the train operating company to support the partnerships within the franchise area. Austerity, handed down to the Local Authorities by the Welsh Government (in turn handed to them by UK Government) now results in a situation where the future of all existing Wales & Borders Community Rail Partnerships is under threat. We have yet to get assurances from Welsh Government that the excellent model put forward by DfT for other franchises in England (and Scotland) to support and develop community rail partnerships will be followed, and are currently reliant on a commitment from ATW to part fund each of the Wales & Borders partnerships until the end of their tenure of the current franchise. However, this is not enough in it's own right to allow the partnerships to thrive and deliver outputs for the communities they serve.

There is also a concern that the forthcoming franchise will focus heavily on 'metro' areas, at the cost of rural lines such as the Cambrian.

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Regional reports and indeed the former Regional Transport Consortia did identify a lack of investment in rail as a barrier for economic development for rural areas served by rural lines. The Cambrian Main Line is the only direct corridor East-West between Aberystwyth/Mid Wales and the Midlands, but is outdated in terms of running pattern, stocking levels, inadequate seating etc, and we have yet to have any clear acknowledgement from Welsh Government of this fact.

As of the current time, I have very little to be optimistic about in terms of the opportunity for change for the Cambrian lines. There seems to be a far more focussed approach towards North East Wales and South Wales, which are already very well served by rail.

Whilst the peak hourly service on the Cambrian was most welcomed, and indeed has demonstrated the latent demand for an improved service, this 'gift' was down to local campaigning and not down to a structured approach to investment in services.

Likewise, I also note the apparent lack of forward thinking in terms of procuring rail stock for Wales & Borders, meaning that the incumbent TOC will have to bear the brunt of this task, and will inevitably mean that South Wales will again be prioritised – although I remain hopeful this is not the case. If not, then it will be at least 5 years until any improvement in stocking can be released on the Cambrian Lines, probably more unless more of the ERTMS equipped 158 fleet can be prioritised for the Cambrian Lines.

In terms of prioritising, I can offer my views on prioritisation on the Cambrian line, and hope that these views are considered within the wider picture of the franchise specification. An hourly service between Aberystwyth and Birmingham International stations is the minimum requirement needed. This has been campaigned for by various groups for many years, and is no different. Station infrastructure improvements and/or solutions are desperately needed – car parking at Aberystwyth, Machynlleth, Caersws, Newtown, Welshpool, Shrewsbury. Access improvements needed for Dovey Junction, the down platform at Newtown, and Welshpool (to improve the awful footway/footbridge there). We also note the reduction in stock that seems to be the case on the Cambrian lines during major sporting events at Cardiff – causing 'standing room only' on Cambrian trains where journey times are often over 2 hours for passengers. Again, these views are nothing new, and I trust that the Economy, Infrastructure and Skills Committee will be aware of these basic needs for our services on the Cambrian.

Part of the ongoing problem with the above is that the current franchise was/is a 'not for growth' franchise. This was a huge mistake and one that should not be repeated. However, any growth element in the new franchise should be equally shared around the network, and not prioritised for Cardiff and South Wales only. It is good to note the 'rail franchise and South Wales Metro' heading

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for this document, which suggests that the Metro will be seen as a separate entity with a separate funding and develop programme to the rest of the franchise.

In terms of the future, and, taking into account a growing trend and appetite for rail travel from the Cambrian lines, there is a need to ensure that this trend is allowed to grow, and that the current growth is not simply restricted by the shortfalls of infrastructure that has been allowed to remain as-is in some cases since the stations were built some 150 years ago!

Community Rail Partnerships must be allowed to evolve likewise – the Cambrian Railways Partnership under my tenure has developed into something far greater than merely an organisation that prints pretty pictures on tourism leaflets and makes sure the begonias' are looking good on the platforms. Nowadays, the partnership's RDO is actively involved in strategic proposals and projects – from securing additional services to being deeply involved in new station proposals (e.g. Bow Street), and to delivering outputs and outcomes that assist the Welsh Government's own aspirations (in return for grant funding).

Developing the railways means far more than enhancing services in the biggest or most populated areas. Developing the railways means making it easier for people to get to where they need to go, to access jobs, to access education, to access healthcare (as well as tourism and leisure) – and this means that the priority has to be in those areas that are currently limited in these respects. The Cambrian lines is a key example. North Wales has excellent links with the North West of England. South Wales has excellent links with Bristol and onwards to London. Mid Wales has a two-hourly service to the midlands (with peak hourly services only as far as Shrewsbury) on trains which are close to a quarter century old.

Mid Wales will not develop without significant investment in rail.

I hope that my frankness in this response is not mistaken for cynicism or negativity. I have endeavored to give an honest opinion, and I hope that this is received in the spirit it is intended.

Diolch yn fawr

Rhydian Mason

Rail Development Officer

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February 2017.