

Welsh Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: [Wales as a global tourist destination](#),
HC 220

Wednesday 1 February 2023

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[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Stephen Crabb (Chair); Simon Baynes; Virginia Crosbie; Wayne David; Geraint Davies; Ruth Jones; Ben Lake; Rob Roberts.

Questions 188 - 208

Witnesses

[I](#): Vaughan Gething MS, Minister for Economy, Welsh Government; Heledd Owen, Deputy Director of Marketing, Welsh Government; Jason Thomas, Director of Culture, Sport and Tourism, Welsh Government.

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: Vaughan Gething MS, Heledd Owen and Jason Thomas.

Q188 Chair: Good morning. Welcome to this session of the Welsh Affairs Committee in the House of Commons, where we are continuing our inquiry into Wales as a global tourist destination. I am delighted that we are joined this morning by our first panel: Minister for the Economy in Welsh Government, Vaughan Gething; Heledd Owen, deputy director of marketing in Welsh Government; and Mr Jason Thomas, director of culture, sport and tourism in Welsh Government. Good morning and thank you very much for giving us your time.

First, Minister, could I just say how sorry we were to learn of the First Minister's wife's passing? We would be grateful if you would take back our sincere condolences and sympathies to the First Minister. We have all been sharing in the sadness of his loss.

Secondly, Minister, could I thank you for helping to facilitate the meetings that some members of the Committee recently had with your teams in New York and Washington DC? We had a very interesting discussion with them about the promotion of Wales internationally, tourism and international trade, so please pass on our thanks to your colleagues.

If I begin the questioning very broadly at the top line, we have heard various bits of evidence and seen some data to suggest that Wales is not capturing as large a share of international visitors in the tourism market as it could. Do you share that perspective, Minister? Do you think Wales is punching its weight as a global tourist destination?

Vaughan Gething: Firstly, I will certainly pass on your condolences to the First Minister. That is very kind and it has been a very consistent response. I will pass on your thanks to our teams in North America.

We think we could do more. That is part of the reason why we have engaged in some of the activity that we have done. If you look at the share that Wales has, it is only around 2% of international visits. Part of that is because London and the south-east suck up a huge, disproportionate amount compared to other parts of the UK, full stop.

It is part of the reason why we spend time and effort on promoting Wales to other parts of the world. They need to know that we are here and then be interested in the offer that we have. That underpins a lot of what we are doing. I am proud of what we have done but we know that there is more that we can do, and that underpins some of the choices I have made about where and how to promote Wales as a destination.

Q189 Chair: When we were in the States in early January, we were struck by the number of Americans, both in New York and Washington, who, on learning that we were from Wales, immediately mentioned Wrexham. This documentary that has been made about Ryan Reynolds and Wrexham Football Club seems to be far bigger in the States than it is



here in the UK. Have Welsh Government cottoned on to the marketing power of this documentary and using this as a device for selling the brand of Wales internationally?

Vaughan Gething: I think so, and I think Rob McElhenney will be outraged that you only mentioned Ryan Reynolds. Seriously, in terms of what the two of them have done, it was a story that could have fizzled out after a couple of weeks when they were interested in the club and acquired it. They have fully committed not just to the football club but to Wales.

If you look at the way that they have embraced the Welsh language, it is hugely positive to have international figures talking positively about the language—the way they have talked about themselves and the fact that they have been self-deprecating and there is humanity that runs through it. There is a real seriousness about it as well, and it is part of the way of thinking about how you promote yourself and who you get to be ambassadors who have their own interest in it. Part of the reason why we did the pre-World Cup event in New York is because the two of them were going to be there.

We know that they are a big part of the reason why Wrexham—and, indeed, Wales—is getting a much bigger shout. It is also because of the world of social media and new media that is now very common. You and I are of an age where we have had to learn this as we have gone along, whereas I have an eight-year-old son for whom all this stuff is normal. I am trying to protect him from some of it, but, if you are in your 20s, you see the world in an entirely different way to a middle-aged adult and the way they have seen the world growing up. It is about making sure that we capture some of that.

It is part of the reason we got involved with the WWE and the Clash at the Castle. It was not because I remember watching Hulk Hogan when I was a much younger person, but because of the giant social media appeal that that event and that company has. Heledd can talk more about this if you want in terms of the impact of that event and what it did for Wales. Then you have, of course, the World Cup and the ongoing positivity around Rob and Ryan, and their story at Wrexham, which is continuing.

Q190 Chair: In terms of the other end of the equation, is Welsh Government providing support to councils and tourism offices in Wrexham and north Wales more generally to help capitalise on some of this international interest?

Vaughan Gething: Yes, it is a regular partnership. The leader of the local authority regularly has a view, as, indeed, do all the elected members around there. It is about how we promote Wrexham and the story that is there already, because of Rob, Ryan and the football club, the programme that they have done and their ongoing social media profile.



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It is also about how we make sure that it then expands out from Wrexham. To be fair, they are both really good at talking about more than Wrexham and what else you can do. It is part of what we aim to do and that partnership with different parts of Wales to maximise and sell the overall brand of Wales.

Q191 Ben Lake: I am interested to hear a little bit more about your views as to the strengths that Wales has. Which are the key points or attributes that perhaps serve us well as a global tourist destination? On that as well, I would be interested to know how you see brand Wales when it comes to international tourism.

Vaughan Gething: It is about celebrating those things that we think we are really good at, and those things that we think make us unique—points of differentiation. If you know where Britain is and if you know where Wales is, there is a point about making clear that Wales is part of Britain, so that, when you come here, this is a place to think about. Within the last two years, we have had lots more profile for Wales.

You think about the landscape, the coast and the mountains. Other parts of the world have coasts and mountains. It is about selling it—"Here is the experience you get". It is our built environment and the history around it, and lots of international visitors are interested in that. The fact that we have more castles per head than any other part of the world is a big plus, and lots of international visitors really like that. My wife has American family, and they really love the history and seeing that. When they come here, they want to go and see lots of different places. It is about the variety in the offer.

The language is part of it, because that is interesting, it is different and it is living. Again, it is part of what has been fantastic about Rob and Ryan's story and engagement with Wrexham. It is about seeing that as a real plus in exactly the way that, in the Basque Country, their distinctness within Spain is a positive that they lean into rather than try to walk away from.

The brand of Wales is not just the dragon. The fact that we have a really cool flag and that lots of people saw it during the football World Cup is interesting, but it is about how you see Wales as a whole and what you get when you come to Wales. "Where is Wales? Do we understand it? Are we interested? Do we want to be part of it?" That is what we are trying to sell. The stories about our people and the way we try to talk about what you will get if you come to Wales is a really important part. Think about the success of Ireland. They sell their history, but they always sell, "You will get a warm welcome in Ireland". In loads of communities in Wales, you could say exactly the same thing.

Cardiff and Swansea, as city destinations, have something to offer, but we should not try to say, "Let us compare those with London", because we say that there is something different and distinct that you will get. You are on the edge of a fantastic coastline in Swansea. You are on the



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edge of real natural beauty, and you can do all of this within a short radius. It is about thinking about how we package up the offer.

Q192 **Wayne David:** Good morning, Minister. As the Chair mentioned earlier, we, as a Committee, visited the United States a few weeks ago. It has to be said that we were enormously impressed by the work that is being done by Welsh Government officials there to promote Wales. We were also impressed with the fact that, as good as that effort was, it was nevertheless relatively small in comparison with Ireland and even with Scotland. What do we have to learn from the Scots and the Irish about how we promote Wales abroad, particularly in America?

You mentioned already how important America is as a market, but there are other markets as well. I was wondering if there needs to be a different kind of presentation of Wales as a country to different parts of the world, particularly Europe.

Vaughan Gething: That goes to the heart of us needing to make choices. America is a really big market and an area of growth. That is why we have deliberately planned in activity with America. The WWE event was about our access to America and a profile in the American market. The reason that I went to Washington for the first game of the football World Cup was because of our ongoing efforts to have more in the American market—not just tourism but international trade as well.

There is a point about understanding where we think we have opportunity. One of the things that I am really keen on is, even if we cannot deploy the volume of resources that other countries do—and we do not need to talk about budgets, because that will get us into sharp party political divides—the consistency of our approach is important, as well as the engagement with the embedded teams that we have there.

If the impression is that we are here for a year and then we might go off somewhere else, that will not help us. We have to be prepared to do something to create awareness and then to build on it and to be consistent. I am going back to America for some other reasons towards the end of March. That is both about the sector that we are going to see, but also about continuing to promote Wales within the US.

In terms of Europe, we know that European markets are also something that we are interested in. Perhaps, Heledd, it might be helpful if you explained some of the work that we are doing on promotion within European markets, some of the opportunities around the World Cup, and how we are looking to track that as well within those key European markets, as well as activity that is going to take place in the year ahead.

Heledd Owen: As the Minister said, we target key European markets through a variety of ways. One of the key ways is our work through VisitBritain on travel trade, which is a key component. That is around travel trade operators bringing visitors to Wales through trade shows. At the moment, we are working with VisitBritain to showcase Britain, where they have brought familiarisation trips over. Then we have digital



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campaigns through which we are targeting certain audiences, and we match our campaigns to audiences where we know that those people have a particular affinity to some of Wales's USPs, such as walking and heritage.

Then we track opportunities and track visitors to Wales.com and to Visit Wales. We also have commercial partnerships such as the one with Expedia during the World Cup. We then aim to change those trackings into bookings. We work in a variety of ways, as well as, of course, our overseas offices on the ground, which are a key component as well.

Q193 Wayne David: Just to go a little further, what do you see as the key difference in approach that is necessary? For example, comparing the Welsh Government's approach towards America with Europe, what is the essential difference?

Vaughan Gething: It is partly about the differential interest from some of the visitors in those markets. We have to promote Wales in a different way in America to make sure that people are aware of that. There will be historic links that will be different to European countries, for example. France and Germany have a different history with America.

The diaspora offer that we have in America is interesting, because of the age of the country, their interest and a variety of things. It is also about the strength of a digital marketing approach as well as in-person. When I was in America, it was made very clear to me, not just by our office but people I met, that having some in-person contact time is really important. The use of the time of officials and Ministers will matter.

Some parts of those markets are just different. France and Germany have other European destinations on their doorstep. American travellers talk about travelling further, but they are more likely to spend more when they get here as well. We are pretty confident that there is more market share that we can acquire from America, both in broader international trade as well as international visitors, for tourism.

Q194 Chair: Minister, you mentioned diaspora. When we were in New York, we met with the New York Welsh diaspora business grouping. We were very impressed with some of their initiatives that they are trying to take forward. Does Welsh Government have a diaspora strategy?

Vaughan Gething: Yes, we do. When Eluned Morgan was the international relations Minister, one of the things that she did was to look at and try to create a diaspora strategy. We have diaspora groups that we are aware of. Our office in North America maintains contact with them. There is a Welsh caucus in Congress. We are looking to do more to get those diaspora groups to recognise who each other is and then to do work with us, because there are obvious opportunities around that. It is one of the things that other countries internationally have been relatively successful at. Our challenge will be not just identifying them but



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prioritising where we think we can make the most progress in this as well and how we make it, frankly, as easy as possible too.

Q195 Rob Roberts: I am interested to talk about the role of Visit Wales in how everything fits together. Visit Wales is unusual in that, of all of the other "Visits"—VisitEngland and VisitScotland—Visit Wales is the only one that sits within the Welsh Government as opposed to being an independent body. I wonder if you can talk a little bit about that and justify that, and about what the pros and cons are of it being internal rather than independent.

Vaughan Gething: I do not think that being internal makes any practical difference to its effectiveness. It is something where there is a direct and honest relationship. We are very clear that Visit Wales is respected within the sector and the industry. We had a choice about whether it was achieving as an arm's-length body. I am very comfortable that Visit Wales is in the right place. I do not think that somehow trying to create an external body will see a significant benefit to the sector. Even though VisitEngland is embedded within VisitBritain, it is an arm's-length body. It has, understandably, a very close relationship with DCMS as its essential sponsor Department.

Q196 Rob Roberts: It is just a different structure and I was interested in the justification for it. What concerns do you have from Welsh business leaders in the tourism sector when you go around and speak to them? What are their main drivers of problems? What are they saying to you are their biggest issues that they are facing currently?

Vaughan Gething: Not that long ago, it was people and getting enough people to staff the sector. You will remember, through the pandemic, there was an explosion of domestic tourism, because people could not travel, and it was meeting that demand with people. Even after the pandemic eased, it was people. Now, it is much more about energy, inflation and still having the people to staff where they are. It is the broader economic picture.

Because this is a sector that relies on discretionary spend, the biggest immediate concern is whether there will be enough people willing to spend money in their businesses and how they survive through what is likely to be a really difficult year ahead. While the predictions are that it could be a shallow recession, a long recession of a year or more is really difficult news for this sector and related sectors like hospitality.

Q197 Rob Roberts: What input have Welsh tourism attractions and businesses contributed to overseas marketing? You mentioned the WWE and the event in Cardiff, and I would be interested to hear from Heledd, given that you said that she could explain what impact that had had. How much input does tourism have in your overseas marketing campaigning and budget?

Vaughan Gething: We have an international visitor strategy. It is about promoting people to come to Wales. Heledd explained earlier how we are



looking to engage with other parts of VisitBritain, but work that we do individually as well, in promoting opportunities to try to get not just influencers but others interested in the offer that we have here.

The sector is broadly very supportive of the work that we do, and there is an understanding of why we are targeting North America and European visitor markets as well. I do not think that we have a problem with the sector engaging. Of course, I regularly meet the sector as well, so they do not find it difficult to have a conversation with me or, indeed, with officials.

Heledd, do you want to go through some of the feedback that we directly had and some of the information? It might also be interesting if you could give an indication of the sort of profile that we had from Clash at the Castle and what it might have cost for us to have purchased that commercially as well, to give an indication of the value of the event in the American market.

Heledd Owen: WWE came to Cardiff last year. There were a number of components. It was first to bring the visitors into the city. It was a sellout event. The reason that we were then also particularly interested was because of their huge social media following. We worked very closely with WWE and took it to a new level, I would say, in terms of bringing some of those wrestling stars to Wales—you saw them on ziplines, et cetera—and using their exposure to reach US audiences.

We trended and were number one on Twitter that day in the US and the UK. It set new records in terms of its live streaming profile and the numbers that paid to see the event. We also worked with the organisers to make sure that, at the beginning of the pay per view, if you were to watch it in the US, there was a large segment of around six minutes, which showed some of Wales and its fantastic scenery. The value of that would have been in the millions.

Vaughan Gething: That was a deliberate choice that we made with them about the event and our support for it. It was not just about promoting Cardiff. That giant love-in infomercial at the start of the event and all the activity before was all around Wales. You may or may not have noticed a number of WWE stars going around north Wales during the course of it, as well as west Wales, so it was not all just focused on Cardiff, and that was really important for us as well.

Q198 **Virginia Crosbie:** Bore da, Minister. It is always a pleasure to have you on the Committee. My question relates to Sean Taylor, director of Zip World, who said that there is more to Wales than sheep, rugby and rain. What are you doing to promote adventure tourism, food and drink, heritage sites and, of course, the Welsh language?

Vaughan Gething: Those are key components of things that we do regularly talk about. We just talked about the fact that we had Clash at the Castle. We had people in north Wales looking at lots of the adventure



tourism. It is part of the offer. If you go to south Wales or west Wales, you have adventure tourism as well. That is a key part of our offer and fits in with us promoting our landscape.

We use myths and legends in our marketing and there is lots that goes in—not just the past but how that can link into activity today. We are going to be doing lots more on promoting food and drink. We have announced the Year of Trails. We are going to have an opportunity to have a variety of that offer in different parts of Wales. We talked earlier about the way that the language is a really positive differentiator for Wales, as is the culture and the history that come with that.

In all those areas, we see those as strengths to promote within the offer for Wales. Cardiff is part of the offer for Wales but is not the only thing that we talk about—far from it. We are very keen to make sure that value is seen in different parts of Wales. Lots of international visitors see travel in a different way. Once they are here, they do not just want to stay in one location. It is not like going on a sun and spade holiday, where you stay in one location for a week. Lots of visitors are interested in travel and seeing different parts of the experience that Wales has to offer.

Q199 Chair: One of the themes that I was keen to explore when I was meeting your team in New York and Washington was this idea of collaboration versus competitiveness when it comes to the UK Government offices and VisitBritain as well. Efe, your officer in New York, spoke very well about striking that balance between collaboration and knowing that her mission is to promote Wales and to capture every opportunity possible for Wales, ahead of other parts of the UK. It is an interesting tension. How do you go about approaching that tension in your work as the Minister? To what extent do you see yourself collaborating with the UK Minister for Tourism, or do you see yourself in competition with him?

Vaughan Gething: The honest truth is that it is a bit of both, because there is a tension, as you point out. If we were having this conversation a few years ago, I would probably have been less positive, albeit it was a different portfolio then, but the relationship has improved over time with VisitBritain, because of the way that VisitEngland is embedded within it, seeing the difference between when it is just an England enterprise and when it is generally a British enterprise, promoting all the nations within Britain, and the role of the tourism Minister in the UK Government and how they see themselves.

That is the challenge. Because VisitBritain sees DCMS as its sponsoring Department, you have a tension around whether this is just a message about promoting Britain or just about England. Our working relationship has improved. The VisitBritain board came to the International Convention Centre a few months ago, and I went and spoke to them and answered questions. We talked about the offer that Wales has and how we want to see VisitBritain positively promoting the different parts of Britain as part of the offer to international visitors.



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Again, that is a real issue for us. It would be for Scotland and for Northern Ireland, but also, if you were talking to regions of England, they would want to make clear that VisitBritain was not just promoting Big Ben and a royal palace. That is the work that we are trying to do.

That tension exists in other fields as well. When I go and do international trade visits, and when I have been out in the region, our relationship with the Department for International Trade has been constructive locally, but there is a bit of a tension there as well. That is part of the work of being constructive in this.

It is not all about the competition and saying, "You cannot trust the people over there", but we do need to make sure that we are getting a fair shake of the VisitBritain activities. If they are doing an advert about Britain and there is no part of Wales in it, that is a problem. It is about us making clear that they have to be clear about the breadth of the offer that they are there to promote.

Q200 Chair: Minister, do you pick up the Minister on that? To what extent do you pick up the phone to the Minister here in UK Government and challenge them on that? How does that work?

Vaughan Gething: We have had a number of meetings around the sector. There have been different Ministers who I have spoken with in my tenure, but there has never been a problem in constructively pointing out that VisitBritain has a British-wide mission, and then going to some of the other areas that attract international visitors.

If we are talking about future sporting opportunities and the fact that there is interest in a Euros bid in the future, I am very clear that the strapline of the four nations of the UK and Ireland could not be, "It's coming home". That is just not acceptable, unless it is, "Pêl-droed yn dod adref". That might be okay, but I doubt that other people would sign up to that.

We have to be clear that, when there is a unifying message, everyone is supposed to get something from that. We have raised that, I have raised that and my officials have raised that in a way that is designed to be constructive.

Q201 Virginia Crosbie: In terms of the main concerns that you have had from Welsh business leaders in the tourism sector, what is the feedback that you have had from them? Are you listening to them and are you proactively taking on board what they are saying?

Vaughan Gething: When it comes to the No. 1 concerns about inflation, energy and the impact of the cost of living, both on them as businesses, as well as what it does for their potential consumers, you will know that we have matched the non-domestic rate support within the sector that has happened in England. It costs more of the Welsh Government budget because of the size and shape of our small and medium-sized businesses.



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We are also looking to carry on promoting tourism activities and asking people to think about what we are doing. We are still going ahead with having a themed year this year to try to make sure that people, both within the UK as well as internationally, are seeing Wales as a real location for them to come to and have a great time.

In terms of how they want to go about doing that, part of our challenge is always going to be the levers that we have to deal with some of those issues. Energy support is an area where the sector understands that it is not a choice that we can make, but the levers that we do have are part of it. The continued promotion of the sector is something that we regularly and progressively do, as well as the honesty in the things that we cannot do.

That is one of the things that we regularly hear from people. They may ask us to do a number of things, but they would rather know sooner than later that we cannot do them, as well as things that we will do.

Q202 **Virginia Crosbie:** Could you give us an update on the tourism tax? When will it be implemented? How will that work with local councils? Where will that money be invested? Will people see that investment? What has the feedback been from the tourism and hospitality sector?

Vaughan Gething: The headline message is that the leaders from the sector would prefer that we were not going to deliver our manifesto pledges, but we have been honest with them. It is in the manifesto, it is in the programme for Government, and we are committed to doing it. We have had the consultation on the visitor levy, which closed in the middle of December. We had over 1,400 responses. That was a variety of in-person events and online events, as well as people being able to respond to the consultation online or in hard copy.

The visitor levy would not be introduced until towards the end of this term, because we need to get it right. It is then going to be a matter for local authorities. We have always been clear about this. A visitor levy for Cardiff might not work in Gwynedd, and a visitor levy for Gwynedd might not work in Pembrokeshire. Wrexham may decide that it does not want to introduce a visitor levy, and that would be a choice for the local authority. One of the things that we are looking at in terms of the design of it is around the visibility of not just the rate of the levy but how the money would be used, and how local authorities then publish information on how they are using the levies.

Of course, a levy is in widespread use in dozens of locations around Europe and the wider world. We talked about North America earlier, where you often end up paying two visitor levies. When I have previously visited in the dim and distant days when I took family holidays to North America, there was a levy for the city as well as for the state. They are really small amounts and, in the overall cost, they are not significant. If you have been on a sun and sea holiday in Spain, for example, you have probably paid the levy as well. It is the amount of very small



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contributions and what they mean in totality to support community infrastructure and the sector.

As you will know from your own constituency, tourism can bring real benefits, but people want to go somewhere where there is a real community that exists and survives as well, which does bring particular pressures at various high points in the season. It is about the balance of that, and we think that local authorities are best placed to decide, in consultation with their local sector, on whether to introduce a levy, at what level, and then how they will publish information on its use.

Q203 Ruth Jones: Good morning, Minister. It is very good to see you. Following on from the tourism stuff, Japan and Germany have used initiatives such as time-limited passes combining rail and bus tickets, and possibly centres and things like that. Have you looked into that and are their developments going on with that sort of initiative?

Vaughan Gething: Travel passes are one of the things that we are looking at in terms of joined-up ticketing and what that might look like. We have some bigger challenges that would stray into a colleague's portfolio around how we have greater join-up on different types of travel—bus and rail in particular—to move around Wales.

We also support and engage with the sector in different regions of Wales in terms of how they look to join up the offers for different visitor attractions. I know that, for example, the ziplines that exist in north Wales have a range of partners within their group. There are also other activities.

They have a tourist trail with a range of different activities through the broader Snowdonia area, which promotes a range of activities. In south Wales, you might end up seeing collaboration, going back to the adventure tourism point, between promoting BikePark Wales, the zipline at Tower, and the International White Water and Cardiff, because they are all within a distance where there is a relatively easy travel to work.

That is ongoing work with the sector. I do not think that, in my ministerial office, I should try to remote control how those things are done. It is ongoing work. I would not try to tell you that it is complete or that I can tell you now what will exist in the summer, but it is something that we continue to look at and see how we can be helpful. Part of the challenge of being in Government is the things that you can do to be helpful and when you need to let the sector do what it could and should do together, beyond the convening power of getting people into a room to talk to each other.

Q204 Ruth Jones: Are there active talks ongoing with the industry in terms of facilitating these passes? I appreciate that, as you say, there are challenges, and I am just wondering whether you are talking to people in rail and buses, but also the local attractions. Is that active work at the moment?



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Vaughan Gething: There are conversations that take place between Transport for Wales, for example, and the sector in terms of how it can promote it. Lots of the activity that promotes Transport for Wales services is geared at the visitor economy as well, talking about the different places you can go to and what you can see and do there.

That link already exists there. How we then further develop and formalise it is an ongoing conversation. What I do not want to do is to try to claim that there is specificity that I can give you now as opposed to the fact that it is a regular conversation that takes place about the very clear links between how easy we make travel and the opportunity to take part in the visitor economy in different destinations around Wales.

Q205 **Geraint Davies:** The situation with getting people who are arriving at Heathrow to Wales is one of time and cost. You will be aware that Wales has been massively underfunded in terms of its rail infrastructure over many years, and we are not getting our 5% of HS2. In the meantime, is there a strong case for UK Government to put their hand in their pocket to provide subsidised train travel to Wales to help stimulate the tourism economy? I know that you are thinking about a tourism tax, but would it not be better for the UK to make up for lost time and help stimulate that market now?

Vaughan Gething: The first thing that I would say is that I welcome the fact that this Committee has been very clear that there should be a consequence for Wales from HS2, and it should be designated an England-only project. That is just the reality of how it is, and I am glad that there has been cross-party recognition of that.

The challenge would be that, if the UK Government were going to invest in subsidising rail links between Heathrow and Gatwick and how it would get people to Wales, we would, of course, support that. If there was money available, though, we might want to use it differently to promote the transport network in Wales, because there is a history of underinvestment, as you say.

There are clear benefits to getting people into our biggest international airport hubs and getting them not just to London and the south-east, but to all the other parts of Britain where people can have a great time and a great experience, and that definitely includes Wales.

It is not that difficult to get from those big transport hubs into Cardiff, certainly, and we hope to see improvement in transport links to get to north Wales as well. The interest in Wrexham is a really good reason for that, because lots of our North American visitors have an awareness of north Wales and Wrexham, but Wales generally, that would not have existed just a couple of years ago.

Q206 **Geraint Davies:** The real need is for the investment and the money from Cardiff across west Wales and, indeed, across north Wales to enable tourists to easily and cost-effectively get across Wales and to enjoy all



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our attractions. Is that right?

Vaughan Gething: Yes. We want to see more investment in the rail network in particular to make it easier for people to get around more quickly and more reliably. It is a reserved area and, as you have pointed out, there is a significant problem in the way that that infrastructure spend is currently being used and that Wales is not getting its fair share. As I say, I am generally grateful for this cross-party Committee recognising Wales's case.

Q207 **Chair:** Geraint mentioned air connections there. There was a time, Minister, when previous economy Ministers, when talking about Wales's international strategy, would have talked about Cardiff Airport. Where does that sit in terms of your vision for promoting Wales internationally? It is a bit of a sad and difficult story, is it not?

Vaughan Gething: The airport is still part of how we see our international connectivity. Let us talk about the men's football World Cup. When I went to Qatar before the World Cup, I met with Qatar Airways. The First Minister met with them when he was in Qatar during the tournament as well, and we are confident that they will come back to restart activity. That is important from a connectivity point. It is also about a sense of confidence in the future for the airport. The Wizz Air news is disappointing. There are other carriers in conversation with the airport about activity. Ryanair recently announced more routes through the airport as well.

We still see a future for the airport, but regional airports across the UK are still struggling. There is not a UK-wide strategy. This Committee has also recognised in the past that there is a case for the devolution of air passenger duty on long-haul in the way that that happens in other parts of the UK, so different devolved Governments have different levers available to them as well.

Q208 **Chair:** We are just approaching the close of this part of the session. We were talking about rail connections a moment ago. In one of your earlier answers, you referred to Pembrokeshire, which we, as a Committee, know is the outstanding tourist destination in Wales. Minister, could I make a plea to increase the number of train services going west of Carmarthen? West Wales does not finish in Carmarthen. The number of trains being cancelled at Carmarthen and not fulfilling the route through all the way west to Pembrokeshire is disappointing. There is also a general need to increase the number and quality of services going all the way into fully west Wales in Pembrokeshire. That would be my personal plea, Minister.

Vaughan Gething: That is a personal plea rather than the Committee's settled view. I recognise that there is real benefit on a whole range of fronts from more reliability within the rail network, and it is why we are investing in the rail network. What we want to see is this Committee's call made real for UK Government investment in the broader network.



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I am sure that it is not just the Newport ship, Gower or north Wales, or a whole range of other destinations. I cannot mention every single county in Wales. As part of what we have, there is as an offer that differentiates itself within each of the parts of Wales, and we want more people to be able to come and enjoy that, including the potential for Pembrokeshire too.

Chair: Thank you very much, Minister. We are really grateful for your time, and thank you for answering our questions so fully. Thank you to your colleagues who have also joined the call. Thank you, Minister Gething.