

Written evidence submitted by Shrewsbury Aberystwyth Rail Passengers Association (SARPA) (RIW0016)

SARPA submission on Railway Infrastructure in Wales

The current situation – rail ownership

SARPA notes that decisions affecting rail services in Wales are made in Cardiff, but decisions affecting rail infrastructure in Wales (Core Valley Lines excluded) are made in London. This disconnect poses some obstacles to the improvement of rail services (which the Welsh Government claims to be keen to carry out). For instance, if politicians in Cardiff are keen for the frequency of a service on a single track line to be enhanced, it is politicians in London who would be expected to invest in additional passing loops, unless the Welsh Government pay for such loops out of their general budget. The Welsh Government has done this on many occasions, however since Wales receives no Barnett grant for rail infrastructure spending, this spending effectively comes from other budgets like health. This makes rail infrastructure improvements on a large scale rather difficult politically and appears to be one of the reasons why the Welsh Government is spending much of its infrastructure spending on roads instead. We hope that powers to enhance rail services will increase ambition in Cardiff Bay and we wish to see the spending balance tip from road to rail.

However, there would need to be close cooperation to ensure good service and connections to and within England. In particular, SARPA strongly insist that Cambrian services must continue to Birmingham International.

Intergovernmental cooperation presently

Intergovernmental cooperation is vitally important but often lacking. This is particularly evident when there are different political parties governing in Cardiff and London. Issues such as the cancelled electrification to Swansea, lack of infrastructure enhancements spending relative to population and so on have become a point of friction. There is little evidence of Westminster spending on infrastructure enhancements in Wales; on the other hand most of the Welsh Government funded Wrexham-Chester redoubling was in England! The fact that control for services and infrastructure resides with different governments allows politicians to blame each other for inaction.

It doesn't have to be this way. There are seamless rail services across many borders in Europe, and the governments on either side cooperate to provide the best possible service. After all, connectivity is important from an economic standpoint and also from an environmental standpoint (modal shift).

Devolution of Railways

In answer to question 3, SARPA is broadly supportive of the devolution of rail infrastructure, subject to certain conditions:

- WG spending on railway infrastructure should be at least equal to the grant they receive for this purpose – it would be sad to see the money disappearing into the general pot.
- A panel of representatives from the English border areas should be a statutory consultee for any planned infrastructure enhancements/changes on cross-border routes.
- Network Rail should be empowered to work with WG to deliver projects.
- Wales should have a similar formula to Scotland regarding HS2, with a Barnett consequential, adjusted according to the rail benefit of HS2 to Wales. We note that Scotland will at least have through services on HS2, whereas Wales will not.

We note that Network Rail generally undertakes the work on the Scottish rail network. Presumably this model could also be used in Wales to provide expertise and economies of scale.

The other concern raised is whether a Welsh railway network could recover from landslides, storms, floods etc. This should be considered with perhaps the earmarking of reserves for rail network emergencies.

It is a shame that the Welsh Government didn't express any interest in taking these powers in 2005 and we hope they'll now be more proactive and show ambition for improving the railway.

Investment Share

The Wales route serves 5-6% of the UK population. The percentage of renewals and maintenance investments carried out on the Wales route are roughly in line with population share according to our calculations. However, the percentage of enhancements spending that occurs on the Wales route is incredibly low, at something in the order of 1%. This situation is fundamentally unjust, and condemns passengers to a second-rate service and the Welsh economy and environmental efforts to underachievement. We feel that if there was more investment in infrastructure, such as additional passing loops for more frequent services, rail use would increase, which would bring economic, environmental and social benefits. It is worth noting that passenger number increased phenomenally on the Cambrian following the enhanced service frequency; this was made possible by the installation of a passing loop and a dynamic loop. Enhancements spending increases the usability, reliability and ultimately patronage of the railway.

Regional Development

Wales has been seen as a region requiring help since at least the 1960s. During this time, the rail network in Wales has been mutilated and not enough work has been put into enhancing what remains. Improving connectivity requires infrastructure improvements such as extra passing loops and tracks, line speed improvements and possibly new lines. Many parts of the rail system are slow, including the Cambrian west of Talerddig.

As noted above, infrastructure spending increases passenger numbers and boosts the economy, as well as providing modal shift with the associated environmental benefits. Better connectivity would also help struggling economies such as in Ceredigion and Gwynedd.

Covid effects

Traffic on the Cambrian has seen a major decrease due to covid, in line with the rest of the UK rail network. However, strong passenger growth prior to the pandemic, a full hourly service on the way and lots of leisure travel on the line suggest a good recovery. The leisure travel aspect of the line will probably increase passenger numbers quite significantly when people are able to travel freely again. We note that many Welsh lines, such as the Cambrian, serve a number of holiday resorts and seaside communities. Infrastructure should be improved to support this.

Union Connectivity Review

As mentioned earlier, we are keen to see cross-border links enhanced and maintained, for the benefit of all. This is primarily a rail service/franchising issue; however enhanced infrastructure allows the enhancement of services.

We also note the proposal to build a rail tunnel between Stranraer and the Belfast area. This is surprising, since the traditional route to destinations on the island of Ireland is via Wales. We would therefore welcome investment in railway lines between England and the Welsh ports. There is already a frequent service from Dublin on to Belfast and thus Northern Ireland.

Dr Jeff Smith, SARPA Chair

The Shrewsbury Aberystwyth Rail Passengers Association is the Rail User Group for the Cambrian Main Line. Website: sarpa.info

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