

[National Assembly for Wales](#)

[Enterprise and Business Committee](#)

[Inquiry into the future of the Wales and Borders Rail](#)

Evidence from Prof Andrew Prescott – WBF 21

I travel regularly between Aberystwyth and London, making a return journey on average three times a month. While train staff are invariably helpful and committed to providing a vital transport link for a remote area, my experience has left me shocked that, in a developed country, levels of public transport provision can be so poor, with no apparent political or commercial will to improve matters. Rural parts of Wales are far less well served by public transport than comparable parts of Scotland and England, and the Welsh Assembly Government seems uninterested in the problems caused. The rail connection between Shrewsbury and Aberystwyth is particularly unsatisfactory. A service once every two hours means that every journey is a major undertaking. The single track railway means that punctuality of trains is poor and, with a two hour wait for the next train, the cost and disruption caused by such delays is much greater than with other services. I suspect that the amount of money that Arriva Trains Wales currently spends on coaches and taxis to deal with problems caused by missed connections, etc., on this line would cover a substantial part of the cost of introducing an hourly service. I understand that the Welsh Assembly Government invested some millions of taxpayers money in upgrading the line two years ago to allow hourly services between Shrewsbury and Aberystwyth, but this investment has led to no ostensible improvement in service – indeed, if anything the occasional services have become even more unreliable. I am astonished that the Welsh Assembly Government should be so wasteful with taxpayers money as to pay for improvements and then not ensure that the service improvements are promptly made – the failure to enforce this improvement is simply throwing public money away.

There can be no question that the urgent introduction of an hourly service between Aberystwyth and Shrewsbury would vastly improve the quality of life of many people and communities in West Wales. In particular, it would bring economic benefits. My

department works closely with the National Library of Wales and the Centre for Advanced Welsh and Celtic Studies on projects involving advanced technological research into cultural heritage which have the potential to raise millions of pounds in research funding. We would like to do much more, but it simply is not practical because of the sub-third world rail link. An hourly service would ameliorate this and allow new collaborative enterprises more easily to develop.

Some attention should also be given to bus links. I accept that the integration of bus and train timetables is a complex matter, but given how rarely trains appear in Aberystwyth, and that at present both trains and buses are run by the same company, some degree of integration should be feasible. To run the last bus from Aberystwyth to Cardigan at 20.55 when there is a train which arrives just half an hour later is verging on the perverse.

I note the great success of the introduction of hourly trains on the Ipswich–Lowestoft line – another long rural single track line. I see that this will now be used as the basis for many other improvements, including an enhanced Sunday service and possible electrification. What is good for Eastern England should surely be good for Wales. Working in London, I note the great success of the overground investment which has revitalised very poor and rundown rail links and shown how successful targeted investment which introduces frequent and reliable services can be. We need and deserve the same in Wales. Certainly we deserve much better than the current dreadful franchise holders have offered, and having enjoyed recent journeys on East Coast Rail very much, the case for considering a not-for-profit social rail franchise for Wales seems a powerful one.

Yours sincerely,

Andrew Prescott