

CHESHIRE WEST AND CHESTER COUNCIL

TRANSPORT COMMISSIONING SERVICE

September 2013

RESPONSE TO THE WELSH GOVERNMENT ENTERPRISE AND BUSINESS COMMITTEE INVITATION TO CONTRIBUTE TO THE INQUIRY INTO THE FUTURE OF THE WALES AND BORDERS RAIL FRANCHISE

1.0 Context

1.1 The passenger rail network in Cheshire West and Chester serves important travel needs for two way business and employment cross border travel with north east Wales, Merseyside and Manchester. Chester and Crewe are also important rail hubs for travel to and from the wider rail network. Visitor, recreational, education and personal business travel represent other major key passenger flows.

1.2 Cheshire West and Chester Council welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the work of this inquiry, building on our productive collaborative engagement with the Welsh Government, Taith, Arriva Trains Wales, Cheshire East and Warrington Councils amongst many other stakeholders.

1.3 Cheshire West and Chester Council wishes to emphasise the need to ensure that service delivery from 2018 is able to meet and exceed the expectations required for providing an attractive, cost effective and safe overall product for passenger rail travel across and beyond the current Wales and Borders rail franchise network.

2.0 Priorities

2.1 For electrification of the Holyhead – Chester – Crewe line to be included within Network Rail's Control Period 6 (2019 – 2024) enabling seamless access with the HS2 line (Phase 1: 2026 to Birmingham; Phase 2: 2032 to Manchester). This is the only section of the West Coast Main Line to be electrified which would enable full compatible use of rolling stock across that network.

2.2 To maintain and enhance through services between Crewe, Chester and north Wales, recognizing the two way significance of Crewe and Chester as hubs for the visitor and business communities, particularly in respect of HS2.

2.3 Completion of electrification of Chat Moss (between Warrington and Manchester) will also enable through electric services between Liverpool and Manchester. Further electrification between Chester and Warrington would enable electric services to operate between Holyhead, Chester, Warrington and Manchester. Frequency improvements of direct services between the north Wales coast, Chester and Manchester Airport should be introduced.

2.4 Reduction of journey time on the Holyhead – Chester line through a combination of introduction of additional limited stop services making use of the path that the current Virgin Trains London service would otherwise operate, and the impact of signalling enhancements to be completed in phases between 2015 and 2020.

2.5 Introduction of through services between north Wales, Chester, Helsby, Frodsham, Runcorn, Warrington, Liverpool Parkway (for airport) and Liverpool Lime Street through reinstatement of the Halton Curve.

2.6 The above improvements of through services linking north Wales and Chester with Manchester and Liverpool Airports are an essential aspect of increasing the connectivity of this region with travel to from the national and international locations accessed by air travel. Opportunities to secure investment from the airport operators should be pursued, in addition to use of data about airport users to strengthen the business case and demand projections for such improvements.

2.7 Improve reliability and introduce a half hourly frequency of the Wrexham – Bidston service, (including Neston, located within Cheshire West and Chester) including electrification. This connects at Bidston with the Merseyrail network, with the Wrexham – Bidston rail corridor having the potential for significant and sustained patronage growth if this service is improved, noting that this links the recently designated Enterprise Zones of Deeside and Wirral Waters. A half hourly frequency would create considerable two way access to employment opportunities alleviating road based travel, (with environmental and capacity impact) therefore meaningful dialogue between the Welsh Assembly Government and Merseyrail is essential to secure a medium and long term growth strategy for this corridor.

2.8 Re doubling of the Wrexham – Saltney Junction line with introduction of a Wrexham – Manchester Airport service, or enhanced Wrexham – Chester service.

2.9 Maintain and develop the role of Community Rail Partnerships with financial and in kind commitments from the rail operator. Cheshire West and Chester Council actively support the partnerships for Chester – Wrexham – Shrewsbury and Wrexham – Bidston (Borderlands) lines. Assessment of business cases for micro franchising should be encouraged, particularly where these can strengthen the desired outcomes of local communities.

2.10 Introduction of new stations at Queensferry and Deeside Park enabling two way access of continued growth of employment opportunities from the north east Wales and Mersey – Dee areas. These facilities are essential for alleviating significant projected capacity issues of the road network associated with this growth.

2.11 To ensure that the Wales and Borders passenger rail network is considered within development of the Rail North devolution proposals for refranchising rail services in the North of England from February 2016 (when Northern Rail and TransPennine Express franchises will end).

2.12 Continued programme of investment of station infrastructure investment, particularly of personal security and enabling practical full accessibility for people with mobility constraints. Additional affordable car parking facilities and local bus service infrastructure accompanied by attractive fares for regular (commuter) travellers are essential to reduce the impact of passengers driving to stations (such as Helsby & Frodsham) closer to their final destination (in this case Manchester) causing access issues for residents local to those stations.

2.13 To achieve meaningful and easy to access opportunities for passengers and passenger user groups to inform the specification of the future Wales and Borders franchise, and for that to

continue throughout its operational life. The rail industry needs to be made more accountable for giving timely proportional consideration and response to issues raised by such groups linked to incentives or penalties. One method for this could be through providing support to local authorities (or consortia) to form and manage regional rail passenger transport forums with statutory authority, Chaired by a local authority (or consortia) Member. These would have clear lines of reporting to the Welsh Government, who in turn have high level powers to ensure the rail industry is delivering its commitments to passengers.

2.14 The experience and values of current and potential rail users should be actively sought to input to requirements of this franchise. This may include; frequency, punctuality, reliability, availability and format of information including use of technology, specification of waiting facilities, cleanliness, seat comfort, leg room, on train facilities and fares.

3.0 Other Matters

3.1 Passenger rail is an integral part of local public transport networks, which local authorities perform a major support and development role. This opportunity should be taken to enable local authorities have a greater input in to specifying minimum requirements and service specifications based on their distinctive role of working with localities and enabling communities to directly contribute to influencing what services are provided for them. This would also include commitments from the train operator relating to interchange between bus / rail services and two way rail / bus ticketing. Local authorities should be able to specify areas (and / or times of the day) when concessionary travel passes should be accepted for local rail journeys. (For example areas / times when no suitable alternative bus service is available) This is a great example of a brokering role that local authorities (and consortia) can bring to this important commissioning work, aligned to central government aspirations of devolving franchising.

3.2 The criteria for appointing an operator for this franchise must include measureable assessment of the full value benefits to be delivered in addition to financial. These must be built in to meaningful and deliverable commitments throughout the franchise duration. Examples could include; increasing affordable access to rail travel for low income groups and those in full time education; impacting on increasing employment in deprived localities served; targets for modal shift to rail on key corridors, provide travel training to overcome lack of confidence of those unfamiliar with rail travel.

3.3 The franchise must seek to future proof against projected needs, embracing them within the franchise commitments, for example allowing for capacity growth on services. The operator should be incentivised to actively develop the market, possibly linked to performance based franchise extension (or early ending for inadequate delivery)

3.4 The franchise commissioning and procurement exercise must seek to maximise a diversity of responses including for not for profit / dividend organisations, but matched by appropriate and robust safeguards.