

Enterprise and Business Committee – Inquiry into the future of the Wales and Border Rail Franchise

1. Background

TAITH is the Transport Consortium for North Wales. It is a formally constituted Joint Committee of the six North Wales County Councils. Its remit is to develop an integrated transport strategy for North Wales, delivering the aims and objectives of the Wales Transport Strategy in the region. In common with the other three Regional Transport Consortia, the Regional Transport Plan (RTP) was completed in 2009, and covers strategic interventions in North Wales to 2015.

2. Introduction

Taith welcomes the opportunity to submit information to the Enterprise and Business Committee inquiry into the future of the Wales and Border Rail Franchise.

3. What lessons can be learnt from current franchise and does it meet passenger needs ?

3.1 We believe that the franchise should be reviewed completely in advance of renewal. In particular the following are areas where the current approach is flawed and has resulted in passengers needs not being met.

3.2 The economic environment back in 2002 / 2003 when the franchise was written was very different to today but in any event the franchise was constructed in such a way that limited flexibility was provided over the term of the franchise. The fact that the franchise was let as a “no growth” franchise by the SRA was in hindsight, an error given the significant growth that has occurred over the life of the agreement. This has resulted in the following issues:-

- Demand growth during this period has been substantial, particularly in North Central / North East Wales. For example over the period since 2004/05 to 2011/12 from ORR Station Usage Data – Llandudno Junction (+50.8%), Rhyl (+30.9%), Prestatyn (+46%), Flint (+75.7%), Wrexham General (+58.8%).
- Services and timetables have been slow to react to changing travel needs in North Wales and in a number of cases don't serve destinations where demand may have been growing over the period of the franchise – most notably in terms of movements to Liverpool, Deeside Enterprise Zone, Wrexham and faster and more frequent services between Chester and Manchester.
- Services that provide access to employment and faster journey times have been particularly limited for those in North West of Wales (west of Llandudno Junction).
- Overcrowding is experienced on a daily basis, especially on the Llandudno – Manchester services in the peaks, west of Chester in the peaks, those westbound services that connect with the hourly London Euston – Chester services and during significant seasonal increases in the summer along the coast.

- There has been no incentive to introduce new rolling stock to cater for growth, new services or to resolve the over-crowding common on many services in our area.
- There has been a lack of incentive to market or provide additional services, to capture potential new traffic flows, especially in support of growing employment destinations or the tourism industry.

4. **Conflict between franchise length / long term decisions**

- 4.1 The Transport (Wales) Act 2006, the Railway Act (2005), and the Government of Wales Act 2008 have all changed the context in which the railway operates
- 4.2 There is a complex balance between the need to retain flexibility, so the franchise can adapt to changing circumstances and an approach that does not make the Welsh Government solely responsible for funding service improvements.
- 4.3 If a model that allows flexibility can be devised, we would support a longer franchise, because of the potential to bring additional investment into the rail network and so that opportunities for better marketing and innovation can be fully exploited by the successful operator.

5. **What are the priorities to ensure rail passenger services in Wales and the borders provide the best possible service for passengers from 2018?**

- 5.1 Recent studies undertaken by Taith identify some clear priorities for rail passengers from North Wales. The principal aim of the next franchise should be that the rail network supports long term economic growth in N Wales, through providing better access to employment and better linkages for business. The N Wales economy is heavily dependent on car based access at the moment, and the rail network should provide a realistic alternative where possible. In particular we have the following comments:-
- The current service pattern has largely evolved by joining together a number of individual services. In reality however the current service pattern will not meet the increased forecast demand for the longer distance inter-urban commuting market for which rail is ideally suited.
 - The current service pattern and frequency neither serves the local, regional or long distance market satisfactorily (with the exception of the West Coast Franchise Services to / from Holyhead to London) serving other markets with varying degrees of success.
 - There are strong economic drivers for better rail links between North Wales to Liverpool, Manchester and major employment sites along the M56 Corridor. New stations, infrastructure, services and a mix of express and stopping services along this corridor will be needed to maximise the economic benefits rail can bring.
 - There are a number of key drivers for modernizing rail in North Wales, especially maximizing economic growth through better rail access (e.g. to Wylfa 'B', Menai Science Park, Deeside Enterprise Zone and Wrexham Industrial Estate), increasing rail demand, reducing journey times, congestion on existing routes, and an increase in rail freight

6 **New / Modified Existing Services**

Based on studies recently completed by TAIH and some analysis of the potential for economic growth in North Wales and West Cheshire, our aspirations for improved services are as follows:

- Services linking the North Wales Coast and Wrexham to Liverpool Lime Street (via Chester, Runcorn, and Liverpool South Parkway for the Airport and Halewood Industrial Areas) – 1 tph.
- Services linking North Wales Coast and Wrexham to Warrington Bank Quay and Manchester (Limited Stop Service, including peak ‘express service’ both west and east bound), complemented by a service that serves intermediate stations. (Increase from 1 tph to a 2 – 3 tph (Fast, Stopping, Semi-Fast)
- Services linking Holyhead to Cardiff and Birmingham (Reduced journey time / increased frequency) – Opportunity for North – South trains to split / join at Shrewsbury and be combined with an accelerated Cardiff to Manchester inter-city service. Service to be complemented with services that serve the intermediate stops over each section of route.
- Conwy Valley line – Increased frequency (currently 3 hourly) and enforced co-ordination of services with the parallel bus service and onward interchange opportunities at Blaenau Ffestiniog, Llanwrst and Betws-Y-Coed.
- Wrexham – Bidston line – Increased frequency (1 to 2 tph) and reduced journey time. There is a long term aspiration for the electrification of the route to enable services to reach the Liverpool ‘Loop’. (Effective interchange at Shotton becomes viable). The route is crucial for access to employment sites at Deeside Enterprise Zone, Wrexham and Wirral Waters.

This will build on the currently planned UK government rail investment programme, the NR resignalling programme along the North Wales Main Line.

7. Integration with other Franchises

7.1 In developing the specification for the next Wales and Borders Franchise it is critical that the appropriate connections with adjacent franchises are made. In the case of North Wales these are;

- Inter City West Coast (Holyhead / Bangor – London Euston & Chester – London Euston & Wrexham – London Euston)
- Merseyrail (Chester / Bidston)
- Northern (Chester / Manchester Piccadilly)
- Trans Pennine (Manchester Piccadilly)
- London Midland (Crewe / Shrewsbury)

8. Additional Stations

8.1 As part of the next franchise it is crucial that provision for additional stations, as part of a service development package, is provided for. The development of stations is integral to service development and local economic growth.

- Wrexham North Parkway
- Flintshire Parkway (Airbus)
- Towyn
- Review of Hawarden Bridge (to see if this or a new location is the best site to serve the Deeside Enterprise Zone including the Northern Gateway Development)

8.2 In addition there are a number of sites where better interchange opportunities should be developed and additional car parking and other facilities provided.

9. How passengers should be involved in the franchise development and delivery

9.1 Taith believes that passengers, employers and other demand generators should be at the core of assessing the need for any services provided and there should be a more focused engagement with the railway industry. There is currently confusion between the various groups that represent passengers, and a single approach would be beneficial to ensure passengers have a strong voice in future delivery or service development.

10. How communities and local government / Regional Transport Consortia should be involved.

10.1 It is crucial that there is effective engagement with local government through the Regional Transport Consortia throughout the whole planning, management and delivery cycle of the franchise. This is important because an integrated network, not just for the railway but with other modes especially buses, community transport and walking and cycling, should be developed to provide viable alternatives to car usage.

11. The management model to be adopted, including the Welsh Government's proposal for a not for dividend model

11.1 The key focus for the new franchise is to ensure better outcomes for passengers. The management model should be aligned to the achievement of these outcomes.

11.2 Given the growth in rail usage there is a strong case for an approach that is flexible enough to respond to changing demand patterns but which also provides an incentive for investment, innovation and better marketing of the network.

11.3 There is a case for a not for profit model, but only if it can be shown that this would deliver better value for customers and the Welsh Government. We also believe there may be options for regional / national variation in the franchise model, so that strategic routes and local services can be developed without compromise.

12. How the franchise specification should improve the passenger experience, including issues such as franchise length, targets / incentives and the core service standards which should be included.

12.1 The franchise specification should identify how the passenger experience can be improved. This should be at the core of the contract and should align with the customers needs especially in relation to value for money, reliability, punctuality, frequency of services and getting a seat.

12.2 There should be flexibility or a mechanism in the franchise agreement to meet changing demands or unforeseen growth over the duration of the agreement, to avoid some of the issues that have impacted negatively on the current franchise.

13. The route, particularly cross-border routes, which should be included?

13.1 From a North Wales perspective, our main markets, and those which have the greatest potential to support economic growth are the major North West cities, especially Liverpool and Manchester, access to the West Midlands, especially Birmingham, links along the West Coast Main Line to London and other major UK cities, and to Cardiff. The franchise should continue to include these core routes.

13.2 We also have considerable potential for growth in demand for better links between Merseyside and North East Wales. There is merit in considering better working synergies with Merseyrail especially on the Wrexham Bidston route and links to Liverpool Lime Street through South Liverpool.

13.3 Accessibility between North Wales and the key gateway airport at Manchester and improving links with Liverpool John Lennon Airport are also important.

14. The rolling stock needed for the new franchise. What factors need to be considered and how this should be procured? Will new rolling stock be required?

14.2 The current lack of rolling stock is a major weakness of the inability of the rail network to meet peak demand at the present time. Additional rolling stock will be required just to service the existing services especially on the North Wales Coast to Manchester services which are already significantly overcrowded. Any future rolling stock procured should have the capability to ensure that trains can be split / joined whilst only requiring one set of crew to operate the combined train. This could create considerable flexibility in service development.

15. How can service delivery after 2018 deliver connectivity and value for money for passengers while reducing the burden on the tax payer?

15.1 Investment and improvements to services on the rail network should be better linked to those of other transport modes, through effective transport planning at a national and regional level. The rail network should complement other transport modes especially serving longer distance markets and commuting patterns, a role it is well placed to deliver. Transport infrastructure should be considered as a whole not as individual modes.

15.2 There should be better integration between the key players in Government and the rail industry. Investments should be planned so that improvements to services, new infrastructure and new rolling stock are provided simultaneously.

16 Whether additional lines, enhancements to existing lines, new stations or other infrastructure are needed?

16.1 There is passenger demand and positive business cases that support providing additional stations at key locations as well as additional infrastructure that creates additional capacity on the network.

- 16.2 Additional lines, enhancements to existing lines and other infrastructure are not part of the franchise but are integral to the franchise in terms of the proposed service specification that it is intended to run.
- 16.3 In the case of North Wales, additional capacity between Wrexham and Chester, reuse of the Halton Curve, and line speed improvements across the network, but especially on the Wrexham to Bidston line is essential. We would also support further work on reopening rail or light rail links between Bangor and Llangefni, Bangor and Caernarfon and between Chester and Mold. The requirement for additional stations is covered elsewhere in this response
17. **Whether the franchise can support an enhanced relationship between Network Rail and the franchise operator and the benefits it might bring?**
- 17.1 The relationship between the franchise operator and Network Rail is integral to the operation of services for passengers and freight users. As noted earlier in this response we believe that it is essential that there are better and more effective links between the infrastructure provider and the operators or services. We would however also recommend that transport planning at a national and regional level is also better integrated, as the rail network must be viewed alongside other transport modes and interventions, as part of integrated transport solutions to providing economic growth and access to services.

Taith
13th September 2013