

Cynulliad Cenedlaethol Cymru	National Assembly for Wales
Y Pwyllgor Menter a Busnes	Enterprise and Business Committee
Ymchwiliad i'r Blaenoriaethau ar gyfer dyfodol Seilwaith y Rheilffyrdd yng Nghymru	Inquiry into the Priorities for the future of Welsh Rail Infrastructure
WRI 02	WRI 02
Cyngor Tref Neston	Neston Town Council



Neston Town Council Response to the Welsh Rail Infrastructure Consultation

1. Introduction

ALTHOUGH WE ARE AN ENGLISH TOWN IT IS RELEVANT FOR US TO SUBMIT A CONTRIBUTION BECAUSE OUR RAILWAY IS PART OF THE WELSH SYSTEM

Neston is a town of 15000 people in the Cheshire West and Chester Council area. Reviews of the area's status and potential have consistently demonstrated that it is a "town on the edge". So far as the Town Council is concerned, we wish to ensure that it is on the edge of success. There is every reason to be optimistic:

- It has an excellent state school that will soon enjoy brand new buildings that will help the young people of the town to compete effectively in the job market.
- It is a great place to live. It has green spaces, the Cheshire Riviera (Parkgate) and affordable house prices.
- Flourishing concerns such as Aldi have expressed confidence in the town by placing their large and growing distribution centre in our area.
- Neston is at the crossroads of Liverpool – north-east Wales economic axis and the Atlantic Gateway corridor from Liverpool eastwards.

Almost the only thing that Neston lacks is CONNECTIVITY.

- There is no major road near enough to the town to be useful
- It has dilapidated rail system from Wrexham to Bidston with old rolling stock, worn-out track and threadbare stations.
- Neston Town Council has found that fares to important local destinations such as Chester and Liverpool not only take longer but are up to 60% more expensive using the local line rather than nearby Hooton.
- Reliability on the Borderlands line is poor – with many cancellations in the recent high-risk leaf-drop season and into December when that explanation was no longer relevant.
- Its railway provides a stark contrast with the Liverpool-Chester line that passes it by at Hooton and provides fast, frequent and reliable services between these places and also to Ellesmere Port. The quality of that electric railway tends to draw economic activity away from Deeside and North East Wales.

2. High level priorities for the development of rail infrastructure to provide the capacity and connectivity necessary to support the social and economic well-being of Wales;

The recent North Wales Transport Summit emphasised the importance of the link between that area and the Northern Powerhouse. Speaking after the conference, Chief Executive of the Llandrillo Menai Group Glyn Jones said: "There's a great deal of interest in the electrification of rail across north Wales and into Liverpool and Manchester."

This only confirms other studies in recent times, for example the North East Wales Integrated Transport Task Force of 2013 that observed: North Wales is an economy worth

approximately £10.4 billion per annum¹ and represents 22% of the economy of Wales as a whole.

The strength in the manufacturing character of the area is, however, illustrated by the fact that North Wales represents over 30% of the manufacturing output of Wales. Much of this includes high technology jobs such as those at Airbus and St. Asaph Business Park, but it should not be forgotten that there are also significant numbers of jobs that whilst not as highly skilled or paid, do create valuable employment for the country and local area. It is also useful to consider North East Wales in the context of its wider economic geography since our evidence clearly shows that people do not base their employment decisions upon national or local boundaries, but on practical realities of gaining an accessible relevant job. The scale of the economy running along the M56/A55 from Manchester Airport to Anglesey generates an output of £31 billion. Merseyside's economy is also growing and is strong in core sectors such as car manufacturing and petrochemicals.¹

Key conclusions of their study were:

- Frequency of rail services on some routes are poor, particularly the Wrexham – Bidston corridor through the economic heartland of the area.
- Identification of funding to facilitate a half hourly service on the Wrexham - Bidston rail line, with all trains stopping at Hawarden Bridge station;
- Flintshire's Economic Development Strategy for 2009-20 also called for future development of the Wrexham / Bidston line to increase sustainable transport opportunities.²

3. How far Welsh Government's rail infrastructure priorities, including those in the National Transport Finance Plan, and the Ministerial Task Force on North Wales Transport report meet the needs of Wales.

That is probably not a question that Neston Town Council is well placed to comment upon – other than to say that the various plans appear to emphasise the value of the Borderlands line. What is lacking is any ACTION to back this up.

4. How the development and exploitation of rail infrastructure in England affects Wales, and vice versa;

The strengthening of nearby links in England does impact on Wales. The provision of the Halton Curve provides direct access to Liverpool and its Airport via Chester from North Wales. But care must be taken to ensure that such developments don't isolate the communities along the Borderlands line. A direct line into Liverpool via Bidston would be an asset to that part of Wales and a proper interchange at Shotton would enable trains to go from Holyhead and Bangor to Cardiff without passing through Chester – making it much more of a Welsh route than at present.

5. The impact on Wales of key planned developments in England including High Speed Rail, electrification, Northern Power House / Transport for the North, and wider devolution of responsibility for rail within England;

¹ <http://www.taith.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/130628-NEWITT-Report-FINAL-High-Res.pdf>, page 2

² <http://www.flintshire.gov.uk/en/PDFFiles/Regeneration/Regeneration-Strategy-2009-2020.pdf> Page 9

Among the large changes is the creation of City Regions in the North including one for Liverpool. Direct access to that is vital for the Welsh economy as acknowledged by the Welsh Assembly leader Carwyn Jones.

“North East Wales needs a solution that connects to Liverpool and Manchester and reflects economic realities, not the invisible political and geographical boundaries.

“Better integrated bus and rail services will not only ensure there are job opportunities for communities but also to help companies to get their goods out in the most effective manner.

“We cannot have economic unit that simply ignores the realities of political boundaries.

“We would like to work closely with the Northern Powerhouse to make sure that we have connectivity between North East Wales and the North West of England.

“That’s why we support the Mersey Dee Alliance because we understand how important it is to have economic units that prosper.”³

Such a solution cannot be achieved without an upgrade of Borderlands line.

6. How Welsh Government can best engage with and influence infrastructure developments in England and the development of passenger and freight services using the network;

It would be most helpful if the Welsh Government could take into account communities such as ours that are not in Wales but have infrastructure that is controlled from Wales. In rail terms we are a Welsh town. If we cannot have equal status with other towns over the border then we should be transferred to an English franchise. When a station review was undertaken last summer only the stations in Wales were reviewed. English stations on the line were ignored. That is a disappointing at the very least.

7. Whether the periodic review process meets the needs of Wales and takes account of the needs of Welsh passenger and freight users, and how this should be developed;

No comment on this point.

8. The effectiveness of the Network Rail Wales Route and whether the approach to delivery of network management, maintenance, renewal and enhancement functions are effective in delivering value for money, capacity, frequency, speed, reliability and handling disruption for passengers and freight users in Wales;

The management of the Borderlands line is poor. In the leaf-drop season trains are delayed and cancelled and that problem continues into the Christmas period because of staff shortages. Consequently, the Borderlands line is simply unfit for purpose in its current state in terms of both the track and the trains. A Neston Town Council member looked at the D train that is being developed by Vivarail at Leamington Spa as having the potential to deliver a half hourly service at reasonable cost but this has not been taken up by Arriva Trains Wales as far as we know.

³ <http://www.walesonline.co.uk/business/business-news/improved-transport-links-between-north-10376716>

The service fails on value for money, capacity, frequency, speed, reliability and handling disruption for passengers in our experience.

What would Neston Town Council wish to see in terms of infrastructure development?

ESSENTIAL

- Electrification of the track from Bidston, initially to Shotton to connect with the North Wales Coast line. A later development should take electrification to Wrexham. An essential product of that change that should be built into the new franchise of 2018 is through working of trains into Liverpool.
- Improved station facilities – ticket machines, staffing, CCTV, toilets and a bus interchange at Neston.
- New station to serve the Deeside Industrial Estate.

IDEAL

- Create a rail junction at Shotton so that trains can move to and from the Borderlands line to the Chester –Holyhead line in all directions. Shotton could become a single station.
- Reinstate the four tracks between Shotton and Chester to enable local services to run frequently alongside rapid through services on the main line from Chester to Holyhead.

9. The fact that funding for Welsh rail infrastructure is not devolved. The advantages, disadvantages, opportunities and risks potentially associated with devolution.

There is a concern that devolution to Wales of funding for rail services will disadvantage English towns such as ours that remain in the Welsh system. We would either like to see guarantees of fair treatment for English towns whose railways are controlled from Cardiff or the transfer of English towns' rail services to English franchises whenever possible. In our case that could be via the creation of an electrified spur from Bidston to Neston or Shotton with the onward services on to Wrexham operated within the Welsh franchise.

10. Conclusion

Neston Town Council has been campaigning on public transport in general (and rail in particular) since 2014. It believes that only a serious infrastructure project will lift the town from its isolation and ensure its inclusion in the growth and progress that is happening all around it. The Town Council endorses the view expressed by Samantha Dixon, the Cheshire West Leader at the North Wales Rail Summit, when she said that:

“Whilst it is our shared ambition to secure economic growth, I do not see growth as an end in itself. Growth must provide the basis for creating genuinely vibrant and sustainable communities.”

Neston Town Council believes that it has the basis for being such a community, but considers that it has been left out of many of the investments that have improved surrounding areas. It urgently needs to be part of the railway investments that are now being considered and therefore requests priority consideration for its desire to be linked to the local and regional engines of growth in the North of England and North Wales by a modern and effective railway line.