

CAMBRIAN COAST RAILWAY LIAISON COMMITTEE

23 May 2024

Extraordinary Meeting

Attendance:

Present:

Cllr Dewi Owen (Cyngor Gwynedd) – Chair
Cllr Gwynfor Owen (Cyngor Gwynedd)
Cllr Anne Lloyd Jones (Cyngor Gwynedd)
Cllr Eryl Jones-Williams (Cyngor Gwynedd)
Cllr Gwilym Jones (Cyngor Gwynedd)
Cllr Louise Hughes (Cyngor Gwynedd)

Cllr Dafydd Meurig (Cabinet Member for the Environment, Cyngor Gwynedd)

Cllr J M Williams (Powys County Council)
Cllr Meryl Roberts (Snowdonia National Park Authority)
Bill Redfern (Shrewsbury – Aberystwyth Rail Passengers' Association)
Delyth Griffiths (Plaid Cymru Office, Dolgellau)
Lorraine Simkiss (Talyllyn Railway)
Liz Parry (Talyllyn Railway)
Stephen Grieg (Blaenau Ffestiniog Railway)

Gail Jones (Transport for Wales)
James Nicholls (Transport for Wales)

Rhian Williams (Integrated Transport and Road Safety Manager, Cyngor Gwynedd)
Lowri Haf Evans (LHE) (Democracy Services Officer, Cyngor Gwynedd)

1. APOLOGIES:

Apologies were received from Liz Saville Roberts (MP for Dwyfor Meirionnydd), Mabon ap Gwynfor (MS for Dwyfor Meirionnydd), Chris Wilson (Carmarthenshire County Council), Trefor Roberts (Shrewsbury/Aberystwyth Railway Committee), Cllr Richard Glyn Roberts (Gwynedd), Ann Elias (Carmarthenshire County Council), Cllr Elfed Wyn ap Elwyn (Gwynedd) and Clare Britton (Ffestiniog Railway)

2. DECLARATION OF PERSONAL INTEREST

No declarations of personal interest were received from any members present.

3. URGENT ITEMS

None to note

4. MINUTES

The Chair accepted the minutes of the previous meeting of this committee, held on 22 March 2024, as a true record.

5. PROPOSED TRANSPORT FOR WALES CHANGES TO THE CAMBRIAN COAST RAILWAY TIMETABLES FOR 2024

In response to the announcement by Transport for Wales that they planned to reduce the number of journeys and amend some journey times on the Cambrian railway, some Members had requested that an extraordinary meeting be held to have a conversation with Transport for Wales officials, so as to obtain more background information on how the decisions had been made together with a justification for the changes.

It was reported that a Transport Liaison Group meeting had been held in Shrewsbury on 11 April 2024 to discuss the changes. Cllr Gwynfor Owen had expressed his disappointment that all decisions had already been made and that there was no rationale for the user figures that had been used to reach a decision, as these gave a misleading impression of the railway's use. (The COVID-19 pandemic, major work on the infrastructure, inclement weather side-effects, difficulties with reliability and performance had all significantly affected the level of service and consequently the use of the railway).

Reference was made to a notice of motion made at the meeting of the full Council (May 2024) where Cllr Gwynfor Owen had proposed that Cyngor Gwynedd makes it clear to Transport for Wales and to the Welsh Government, who are the owners of Transport for Wales, that any cut in the number of trains on the Cambrian Railway is not acceptable, and instead they should look at how to increase the number of trains throughout the year. The motion had been accepted unanimously by the Members of the Council.

It was pointed out that Ken Skates (Cabinet Secretary for North Wales and Transport), had agreed with the need for cuts amounting to £700k, although new trains had been added in some places. Cllr Eryl Jones Williams referred to a letter that Barmouth Town Council had sent to Ken Skates expressing disappointment at the proposed changes to the railway service along the Cambrian Railway. The letter stated that the consultation period had been too short (that 32 days was not enough time to gather responses), and that the requirement for respondents to register to submit their views had likely deterred people from taking part.

In response to the observation, Gail Jones (Transport for Wales) noted that they had conducted an on-line Timetable Review to gather opinion and information on the changes, and not a consultation.

General observations arising from the ensuing discussion:

- Disappointment that the decision had been made before sharing information with users. Disappointed that we had received no information regarding the intention to change the times / journeys during the March 2024 meeting
- The length of the consultation period had been far too short – people without technology were being excluded. It was difficult to understand that it was not a consultation.
- Transport for Wales should consult before making any changes – this was an insult to the people of the area. Extremely disappointed that there had not been a full consultation – what was the reason for this?
- The message being shared by the Welsh Government was that 'there is no investment in new roads therefore use public transport'. They were now making cuts to rail services!
- How did the changes complement the Green Policy of reducing carbon emissions and respond to the climate emergency?
- Many young people were leaving the County, and transport was one of the reasons for this.
- The changes placed a curfew on young people being able to stay out
- The changes were another hit to a rural area – it was not acceptable
- The loss of a service, a delay in improving services, and the loss of trains from an already limited service would have an enormous impact on the regular users of the Cambrian Coast railway – it was likely to cause chaos to the travelling arrangements of workers, students and those travelling to Birmingham airport, together with the effect on businesses and the economy from decreased use by visitors. Cuts would downgrade the railway and create an uncertain future for many.
- Following substantial investment into the restoration of Barmouth Viaduct, it was surprising that cuts were being made to the service. Surely, encouraging use would be a means of paying for the expenditure.
- Before the cuts, we had been happy with Transport for Wales's performance, with increased reliability and things appearing to be returning to normal following Covid: the cuts will have a significant impact on this.

With regard to the figures that had been used to reach the decision, a member expressed disbelief that the figures used were those for use of the railway during Covid-19, when major work had been being carried out on the infrastructure, the side-effects of inclement weather, and difficulties with reliability and performance. These had all significantly affected the level of service and consequently on use of the railway. With this in mind, it would not be possible to rely on data for passenger numbers during these times, therefore there was no accurate or fair picture being reflected. Also, when trains were full, there simply wasn't a ticket inspector collecting money – therefore this led to financial losses and misleading data.

Rhian Williams (Integrated Transport and Road Safety Manager, Cyngor Gwynedd) was welcomed to the meeting and to offer observations on the announcement. She expressed her disappointment and that her comments echoed what had already been stated. She added that a request had been made for Transport for Wales to reconsider the decision, but no response had been received.

Gail Jones and James Nicholls from Transport for Wales were invited to respond to the comments. Both highlighted that a lot of correspondence had been received regarding the changes to the Cambrian rail train times and that all the messages were being reviewed. They reiterated the importance of gathering evidence of the impact and the need to present examples highlighting the importance of the Cambrian – they encouraged people to raise their voice.

James Nicholls noted that the Cambrian railway was important – the railway was recognised as one of the most scenic routes of any railway in the world, and that every effort was being made to work together locally and make the railway better. He added that following the effect of Covid, there had been difficulties getting the passenger levels back to pre-Covid figures, but there was clear passion amongst the committee to present a strong case and continue to promote the railway.

In response to a request to extend the timeframe for responding, he noted that this was not possible but there were already a few comments asking that the changes be delayed for 12 months so that the figures could be reviewed, and to promote the use. Any updates would be shared.

In response to a question regarding what the total saving was and whether this corresponded to the comparison before Covid and recent use, it was noted that it would be possible to share this information. An additional request was made on how the £700k had been calculated.

In response to a concern that train drivers would lose their jobs, it was noted that Transport for Wales were forecasting the staff numbers that would be required for journeys, ensuring that there were relief staff also available to cover illness etc.

The Chair thanked everyone who had contributed to the discussion. He noted that any information or update by Transport for Wales on the situation should be shared with the Committee.

The meeting commenced at 10:30 and concluded at 11:30.

CHAIR