

RAILWAY DEVELOPMENT SOCIETY
South Wales Branch

Response to Consultation Report *Policy Review of Public Transport*

The Railway Development Society (also known as *Railfuture*) is a UK-wide independent voluntary organisation which campaigns for greater investment in, and use of, rail, whilst also acting as a consumer body for rail users. The South Wales branch covers the area from Monmouthshire to Pembrokeshire plus southern Powys.

Our response is in two sections. *Section 1* answers the questions contained in Chapter 8, 'Consultation', while *Section 2* comments on some of the material in other chapters.

Our general view is that the Report contains much to be welcomed and is a good basis on which to progress.

SECTION 1

8.1 Existing Organisational Structures

The existing regional consortia have varied in their effectiveness so far, but even the most proactive of them – SWIFT – has been unable to secure significant improvements in train services in its area. SWIFT has done, and is doing, good work in developing capital investment programmes designed to increase rail capacity and reliability, but these have not resulted in the upgraded infrastructure being used to its full potential.

Two examples of this may be quoted. Firstly, the signalling on the lower Taff Valley rail route has been upgraded largely at public expense but this has not resulted in faster (limited stop) trains, more frequent trains or better services on Sundays, even though the investment has reduced operating costs and should allow these benefits to be realised. Secondly, a new passing loop was installed at Mountain Ash which provides the capacity for half-hourly services on the Aberdare line. The loop was commissioned ten months ago but there is no sign of the half-hourly service being introduced.

Thus, while SWIFT is able to fund, by means of transport grants and other mechanisms, capital investment, it has no power to specify train services, so there is no guarantee that the train operator will make use of the new facilities when commissioned. This compares unfavourably with road schemes which are usually regarded as fulfilling their role immediately upon completion.

We are aware of the existence of the Rail Passenger Partnership Fund which can be used to enhance services beyond the current PSR, and are pleased to note that this should enable the Vale of Glamorgan train service to commence when the infrastructure work is done. But this appears to be the exception to the general rule, and of course decisions on application of this fund rest with the SRA in London and not with the National Assembly or the regional consortia.

Therefore, for the reasons given, we consider that **the regional consortia as presently constituted are not suitable to deliver improved integrated public transport services.**

But there may be a role for such bodies as ‘mini PTEs’ within a national one (see next section). In any case, if it is decided to retain them, they need to be placed on a statutory footing, with objectives and guidelines set by the National Assembly. The latter is essential to ensure that the same standards of service quality are achieved throughout Wales, and with due regard for cross-border liaison.

Options for Organisational Change

We are in favour of a PTA-type structure for Wales, on the grounds that such arrangements work well elsewhere in the UK. It is generally the case that rail services are more frequent, fares are generally lower, and a greater degree of inter-modal integration is achieved in PTA areas, PTAs would address the problem referred to above, where at present there is too great a separation between those responsible for capital investment and those responsible for specifying train services.

We fully agree however with the statement on page 29 (para. 5.7) of the Report, that any PTA would be a model specifically designed to meet the requirements of Wales. Wales has a mixture of urban, semi-urban and rural services, with a higher proportion of the latter than most existing PTAs (though Strathclyde covers a very wide area with some rural territory). An all-Wales PTA would have to consist of regional divisions and it is possible that these could comprise the existing regional consortia, suitably modified (in constitution, and perhaps in areas covered). The Assembly itself could become the all-Wales body.

Confining a PTA/PTE to the ten south-east Wales counties could result in that area enjoying higher quality services than elsewhere. For example, one of the rail services most in need of improvement and enhancement is that between Cardiff and Swansea, where current provision, having regard to populations concerned and distances involved, is very poor and without obvious parallel in Britain. Confining a PTE to the SWIFT + TIGER area would not solve this problem. Therefore we believe that any stand-alone South Wales PTE should extend at least as far as Swansea.

The third alternative, involving the Assembly providing leadership to LAs, seems unlikely to work adequately unless the Assembly has some powers to specify rail services. But we do agree with the general sentiment that the Assembly must give a strong lead to LAs, co-ordinating and specifying targets etc.

8.2 Additional Powers of Direction

It would be helpful if the Report stated more firmly what the Assembly considers it can do with its existing powers, and what it would do if it had more powers. The Scottish comparison is relevant but not easy to translate directly to Wales because a much higher proportion of Wales’s rail services are cross-border ones, whereas Scotland’s railways are more self-contained.

The logic of seeking delegated responsibility for Valley Lines is accepted, but presumably this has been proposed mainly because these services are wholly contained within Wales. Our view is that if this is to be done it would not be sufficient to limit these powers to what are now termed ‘Valley Lines’. That would

introduce anomalies; for example people commuting to Cardiff from Merthyr, Aberdare, Barry (etc.) would enjoy train services and fares controlled by the Assembly, but those from main line stations, nearer to Cardiff in some cases - such as Newport, Pontyclun, Bridgend – would not. We believe that any such delegated powers should include all other services in South Wales *with similar characteristics to those of Valley Lines*. These should include, for example, Cardiff-Pontyclun-Bridgend-Maesteg; Bridgend-Pyle-Swansea ('SwanLine'); the Vale of Glamorgan line; and Ebbw Vale-Newport when opened.

SECTION 2

Although the Report does not specifically ask for views of respondents on chapters and associated recommendations other than chapters 4 & 5, we nevertheless take the liberty of offering such comments because a number of important points are contained in those parts of the Report.

Chapter 2

2.1 *Perception of public transport is poor*: for many people, perception is reality! – especially when multi-modal journeys have to be made.

2.12 **Light Rail**: there is insufficient emphasis given to the benefits of Light Rail, not just for Cardiff Bay but for Cardiff generally, and perhaps for Swansea also. That it was not built into the Bay regeneration scheme from the outset represents a planning failure of the past, which needs to be rectified urgently. Studies have been carried out in the past, and there is a wealth of evidence of the effects of Light Rail elsewhere. The success of the Manchester Metrolink system is well known, but perhaps a closer parallel for Cardiff is Croydon (of similar population, though with a smaller retail centre); there, the Tramlink system carried 16 million passengers in its first year. (Recommendation 14 refers!)

Chapter 3

The *Vision* set out on pp 14-15 is excellent – **IF** it can be achieved. Para. 3.3 summarises it well.

Para. 3.17: could be worded more strongly. Local authorities *must* take a more holistic approach to public transport planning.

Recommendation 3: the Report mentions extending **concessionary fare schemes** to community transport and taxis, but not to rail. Why not? If local rail travel is not included the latter will be placed at a disadvantage. Note that in Northern Ireland the concessionary fare scheme now applies to rail as well as bus, and we urge that this be applied in Wales also.

Park & Ride needs careful consideration of likely effect on modal split. It may help to reduce car traffic in urban areas but could increase it elsewhere, if people take their cars to park & ride on the edge of town instead of train or bus all the way from home.

Para.3.19: good and strong leadership by the Assembly is vital; it has not been strong to date.

Chapters 4 & 5 are covered in Section 1 of this response.

Chapter 6

We agree with what is proposed, particularly Recommendation 14. The importance of carrying this out, *and acting on the findings*, cannot be emphasised too strongly.

Chapter 7

We agree with the Recommendations 1 to 14, except for the reservations noted above in respect of parts of Recommendation 3. We note however that no Recommendation arises from Chapter 5 – *Alternative Organisational Structures*, and suggest that the omission be rectified. An appropriate wording could be: “*that the National Assembly evaluates alternative organisational structures to determine their potential, vis a vis existing arrangements, for improving public transport in accordance with the declared Vision (para.3.3)*”.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

RDS South Wales welcomes the opportunity of being able to comment on the Policy Review of Public Transport, whilst at the same time regretting that we were not invited to submit written evidence or attend a meeting of the committee to discuss our views, as per Annex 1. This is notwithstanding that we have previously submitted a number of papers and other documents to the National Assembly since its inception. We trust therefore that we will not be overlooked in any future consultations on this subject.

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