

Issue 76 Spring 2024

Rail Wales

Newsletter of Railfuture in Wales



Metro transformation: a class 150 Sprinter crosses the A48 dual carriageway under the recently installed wires between Llandaff and Cathays stations. Class 398 tram trains may take over this route towards the end of 2024 with the BR era Sprinters moving to England. Photo: Peter Kingsbury

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WELCOME

I am pleased to start this issue of Rail Wales with the comment that the corner may have finally been turned in bringing about the long-awaited improvements to the Welsh rail system promised in the 2017 franchise award.

After a series of delays and setbacks for a variety of reasons, new trains are starting to arrive in significant number. A new service (Ebbw Vale-Newport) has started to operate on a permanent basis and almost all the service reductions brought about by Covid have been restored. Let's hope that 2024 marks the start of a period of better fortune for Welsh rail services after several years where the passenger satisfaction has been in decline.

This is reflected in the regular Transport Focus surveys of passengers. In the latest 10-month period to early February 2024, Transport for Wales Rail achieved an overall passenger satisfaction rating of 74%, the lowest of all the train operators (the next worst was CrossCountry with 75% which operates no 'local' services- these are generally easier to run on time). On punctuality/reliability, the TfW Rail rating was even lower (63%) with the next lowest operator (Avanti W Coast) scoring 69%.

A glimmer of hope is that the levels of survey satisfaction with TfW Rail in the second half of 2023 were higher than in the preceding five months, the first upturn for several years. As more new trains are introduced and initial 'running in' issues resolved, I hope that performance and passenger satisfaction continues to improve. This ought to happen given the generally positive policy and funding framework in which Welsh rail sits as a result of the thinking of the Welsh Government.

Nevertheless, challenges remain in attracting passengers back to rail as the figures in the latest station usage survey show (see page 4). It is now apparent that rail use for work and business purposes is unlikely to return to pre-Covid levels anytime soon. Given that decision to use trains for leisure is generally more optional than commuting, the future growth of passenger numbers is more dependent than ever on the quality and value for money of the service. It is therefore imperative that rail services in Wales provide the best quality offer possible.

The Wales branch AGM is once again being held just over the border in England at Shrewsbury station, the most accessible venue by train from all parts of Wales. Details are provided below. This is the one opportunity a year for all Railfuture Wales members to meet face to face and discuss

what you would like the committee to focus on over the next 12 months. Please try to attend.

Finally, I have decided to stand down from the role of chair of Railfuture Wales after seven years in the role. Bob Saxby is also leaving the committee – he was branch secretary. I will continue to edit Rail Wales. More than ever Railfuture Wales needs new committee members to refresh and contribute to the mix of voices lobbying the Welsh and UK governments, as well as local authorities. This will help ensure that the case for rail investment is heard and understood by those who decide on spending priorities. Railfuture Wales itself would also carry more ‘weight’ if it was able to increase its membership so, in addition to campaigning, there is a need to attract new members.

If you consider you might be able to contribute to the work and growth of Railfuture Wales, please attend the AGM and indicate that you wish to stand for election to the 2024/25 committee. Most of the discussions and decisions are now made virtually (Zoom) so wherever you live in Wales, access to committee meetings is easy. If you would like to discuss this matter on a no commitment basis prior to the AGM, please contact me (details page 15).

Peter Kingsbury

RAILFUTURE WALES ANNUAL MEETING 2024 **SATURDAY 27 APRIL, SHREWSBURY at 14.00 hrs**

Members and friends are very welcome to attend our annual get together, held once again in Shrewsbury station on a Saturday afternoon in late April.

There will be a chance to review the activities of Railfuture Wales over the past 12 months, discuss any issues and make suggestions for the future direction of the organisation and its parent body, Railfuture GB. The committee for the next 12 months will be decided.

This year, we are very pleased to welcome **Ian Brown** to the meeting to give a presentation. Ian is the national Railfuture policy director and has lifelong experience in working in the rail industry, both in Britain and overseas.

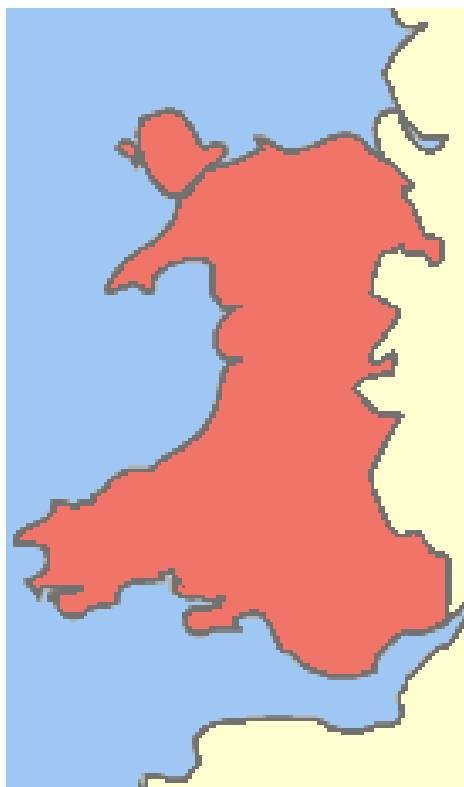


There will be an opportunity to discuss the challenges facing the future of rail transport as the ever-faster pace of change in how we live and work impacts transport demand in the UK. Ian is also well placed to comment on the role and actions of Railfuture nationally in campaigning for more and better rail services.

To attend the meeting, please assemble outside the British Transport Police door on the station forecourt shortly before 14.00 hrs.

THE 20 BUSIEST STATIONS IN WALES: THE POST COVID PATTERN BECOMES CLEARER

The latest statistics for station usage in Wales are set out in the table below. To help understand how the trends since the arrival of Covid four years ago tore a hole in the heart of the rail industry, the usage for the year April 2022 to March 2023 is compared with usage in the 12 months immediately before the start of the pandemic in March 2020. The table below lists the twenty busiest stations for 2022 to 2023 and shows the change in terms of passenger numbers as a percentage of their pre-Covid level. [Source: Office of Rail and Road (ORR)]



Station	2019/20	2022/23	Change
Cardiff Central	13,141,000	10,185,000	77.5%
Newport	2,814,000	2,340,000	83.2%
Swansea	2,134,000	1,884,000	88.3%
Cardiff Queen St	2,784,000	1,714,000	61.6%
Bridgend	1,557,000	1,133,000	72.8%
Cathays	1,002,000	699,000	69.8%
Neath	832,000	666,000	80.0%
Bangor	652,000	578,000	88.7%
Treforest	679,000	554,000	81.6%
Pontypridd	841,000	536,000	63.7%
Caerphilly	739,000	525,000	71.0%
Cardiff Bay	1,522,000	511,000	33.6%
Wrexham General	521,000	489,000	93.8%
Rhyl	519,000	483,000	93.1%
Port Talbot P'kway	561,000	472,000	84.1%
Barry	537,000	452,000	84.2%
Barry Island	787,000	368,000	46.8%
Penarth	643,000	367,000	57.1%
Abergavenny	415,000	360,000	86.7%
Cwmbran	413,000	353,000	85.4%

The data relates to the first 12-month period since the outbreak of Covid when there were no restrictions applying to travel and can therefore be seen as an indicator of the post-Covid demand for rail.

A number of trends emerge:

- Those stations that have lost the smallest proportion of passengers are those with the least dependence on commuter (journey to work) traffic. Thus, stations in the South Wales valleys with many passengers travelling to work, predominately Cardiff, have the greatest falls. However, the single station with the largest proportionate loss of custom is Cardiff Bay, at which, despite it being located in an area of the city with a number of leisure attractions, commuters travelling to the surrounding offices formerly dominated usage.
- The exceptions to the above trend are Treforest and Barry stations which have much smaller reductions in usage. Treforest is situated close to a University of South Wales campus and is greatly used by students travelling between there and Cardiff. Barry seems to have been used as an alternative to Barry Island for visits to the seaside as the figures for the station on the island are lower than expected given the small falls in leisure dominated usage elsewhere.
- Stations with the smallest loss of traffic are those on the N Wales coast plus Wrexham. This confirms the increased reliance in terms of loss of traffic for locations which are primarily dependent on leisure for custom. Although data for the Marches (Newport-Shrewsbury) route stations in England is excluded from the table, the figures for Abergavenny and Cwmbran confirm that traffic on the link between North/Mid Wales/Manchester and South Wales has held up reasonably well.

What does mean for the long-term future of rail usage in Wales? Whilst the future of home working for office-based employees may be uncertain, a return to patterns of five day commuting experienced prior to 2020 is unlikely. This presents a large challenge to those planning investment and marketing of rail with more emphasis on providing excellent services at competitive prices for leisure, use of rail for which is, by its very nature, a more optional choice.

Finally, it is ironic that the parts of the Welsh rail system with the biggest ongoing investment, the South Wales metro, has seen the greatest loss of traffic. To what extent the fruits of this investment in terms of faster, more frequent and comfortable trains, will lead to greater usage remains to be seen. The answer to this question will not be known for several years.

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Dear Sir

New services to Bristol and Cheltenham

The Burns Commission recommended that the new stations along the main line be “facilitated by the reconfiguration of rail services described” elsewhere in their report. This would involve ‘reconfiguration of the SWML into two pairs of lines’ with each station having ‘platforms sited on the northern pair of lines’. Only major stations, such as Newport, would have platforms on the southern pair of lines (known as the ‘Express Line’ in the Burns report maps). This facilitation work has not yet taken place, so TfW’s consultation proposals (with platforms on the current ‘relief lines’) are premature.

Network Rail’s Welsh Route Study (2016) suggested that Bishton Flyover is likely to require replacement or removal, in connection with remodelling of the junction between the Severn Tunnel and Gloucester routes to meet future traffic levels. A new flyover at Maindee Junction (to address crossing moves to/from the Marches Line) was also considered to be necessary. Without Bishton flyover it is possible (depending on the exact design, and location, of the new Severn Tunnel junction) that one or both platforms at ‘Magor & Undy’ station, as proposed in TfW’s consultation, would end up on track served only by inter-city and freight trains.

Would the ‘Burns Commission’ proposal to move inter-city services to what are (at least west of Bishton) currently the ‘relief lines’ ultimately result in a ‘better railway’? As the Burns report pointed out, using the northern pair of tracks for the local stopping services would support Ebbw Vale services calling at ‘Newport West’, ‘Cardiff Parkway’, and ‘Cardiff East’. The same argument applies to possible future ‘Metro’ services to Abertillery. Moving inter-city services to the south side of Cardiff Central (platforms 3 & 4) would also mean that platform 0 would be used for local stoppers. Presumably this means the platform would be extended to 170m, to match the new stations, rather than the 230-260m necessary to accept services to Paddington (as planned by Network Rail). Not only would this save 60 to 90 metres of new platform, it might well also save the most complete major city station of the ‘big-4’ era (Cardiff Central is a listed building for this reason) from demolition. A 170m platform 0 could probably be made to fit; 230 metres and it would smash through the wall of the main art deco ‘booking hall’ / concourse.

With new junction/flyover arrangements required at Maindee and Severn Tunnel Junction anyway, the 'Burns Commission' approach would appear to have only one potential drawback. This is that fast passenger services would have to share the southern pair of tracks with at least some of the freight traffic, since the freight terminals are on that side. Freight simply passing through (ie. not bound to/from those terminals) could of course share the northern pair of tracks with the stopping services.

Clearly, there is a choice to be made regarding the final routing strategy for the South Wales Main Line. Which tracks should be used for stoppers, which for freight and which for fast/inter-city services? Does Railfuture agree that it would be wiser to wait until this is decided before TfW starts building platforms in (what might become) the wrong places? Projects away from the mainline could be progressed in the meantime.

Kind regards
Thomas J Wheeler

Editor's note: Railfuture Wales has raised the issue of how the four-track South Wales main line could be used following the introduction of the proposed new local services in its response to the TfW consultation on the additional stations and services between Cardiff and Severn Tunnel Junction submitted in January 2024 (see page 13).

PETER CLARK: A TRIBUTE

Railfuture Vice President Rhodri Clark pays tribute to his father Peter who passed away in late 2023.

Peter Clark, a long-serving committee member of Railfuture Wales and its predecessor RDS Wales, passed away in December 2023, aged 83.

Peter's interest in railways began while he was growing up in Swindon. However, his career was entirely spent at a factory in Newport. He brought up a family in the area and lived in Abergavenny in retirement.

After joining RDS in the 1980s, he held various committee posts, including chair of RDS South Wales (when the organisation experimented with three regional branches in Wales). For many years he was membership secretary of Railfuture Wales. His involvement in 'Rail Wales' included collecting the magazine from the printers and posting it to members. RDS and Railfuture often benefited from his knowledge of Welsh geography

and his command of written English, such as in production of Development Plans for Welsh railways.

Peter was closely involved in campaigns for new stations at Caerleon and Pontrilas. His greatest achievement in rail campaigning was the successful 'Ebbw Rail' campaign in the 1990s. Among other things, he was responsible for the display stand, which toured events and libraries in the area, and ensured that leaflets and campaign newsletters were printed and distributed.

Also during this period at RDS he successfully liaised with the Pembrokeshire Rail Travellers' Association in safeguarding West Wales rail services during the difficult period around privatisation.

He spent many hours on the RDS/Railfuture stall at local events, particularly for the Ebbw Vale and Vale of Glamorgan rail campaigns. His railway interests outside Wales included supporting the Friends of the Settle-Carlisle Line and the Wensleydale Railway.



He was generally reluctant to use his car, preferring the train whenever possible. He had a lifelong passion for pleasure steamers, stemming from the era of the White Funnel Fleet, and spent many happy hours of his retirement exploring the Scilly Isles, Lundy, the Hebrides and Shetland by public transport and on foot.

He is survived by his wife, three children and six grandchildren.

Peter, photographed in one of his favourite locations, a train carriage.

COMMUNITY RAIL IN WALES

The annual Community Rail Awards were announced at a ceremony held in Swansea in March 2024. Many readers are probably somewhat hazy about what is community rail and its make up in Wales. This article aims to fill in a few gaps.

The concept of community rail began in the early 2000s when the then Strategic Rail Authority (SRA) set up six pilot schemes in England called community rail partnerships (CRPs). Their task was to act as 'mini franchises' with a remit to work towards improving the local service whilst reducing the cost, in co-operation with the local community. They could advise on and even set fares and timetables. However, when the SRA was abolished in 2006 the Dept for Transport and Treasury rowed back on the financial management aspect of the new partnerships and asked them to concentrate on promoting the local train service and informing and involving the local community on rail issues. They would sit alongside and support the relevant train operating company (TOC) but have no formal powers to decide on fares or timetables.

Nearly 20 years on, there exist around 75 community rail partnerships plus many more station adoption groups. In Wales, there are currently five CRPs:

- Heart of Wales Line
- South West Wales Connected
- Cambrian Railway
- Conwy Valley and North West Wales Coast
- Ffestiniog Railway/ Welsh Highland Railway.

The South West Wales Connected Partnership is the newest one having been formed in March 2020 just as the first Covid lockdown was introduced. Despite this initial setback, the partnership, which covers the main line and branches west from Port Talbot, has made significant progress. It is supported and funded by TfW Rail and partners with Great Western Railway and a variety of other organisations, which wish to see more use of the area's rail services ranging from Natural Resources Wales to Ramblers Cymru.

A glance at its website <https://www.southwestwales.co/> illustrates the large variety of initiatives and projects undertaken. These range from improvements at individual stations to network wide projects such as encouraging sustainable tourism and rambles from stations.

The entire movement is overseen by the Community Rail Network which organised the Swansea awards ceremony. This body is responsible for the accreditation of new partnerships and audits annual action plans from individual partnerships. The plans are also submitted (for Welsh CRPs) to Transport for Wales which provides another source of funding. A representative from the network presented evidence alongside Railfuture Wales at the Senedd in November 2023 making a number of references to the Heart of Wales service.

What does the future hold for community rail?

The Williams-Shapps Plan for Rail (2021) stated that ‘Community Rail Partnerships will be empowered to strengthen rail’s social and economic impact’. How this would be achieved was not fully explained. Over two years on, the implementation of the entire plan is clouded in doubt. Furthermore, the rail industry faces ongoing financial challenges which means that TOCs and their government funders may question the need for spending on non core activities such as the interpretation of local rail history. In its defence, community rail would argue that as a result of the leverage of huge amounts of volunteer time, every pound spent on community rail provides far more in terms of output, enhancing not only the rail travel experience but also community life. Those who gathered in Swansea recently will hope the latter point will prevail.

For information on the Community Rail Awards 2024 visit:

<https://communityrail.org.uk/current-winners/>

RAILFUTURE WALES IN ACTION

Evidence to Welsh Senedd

The Senedd’s Climate Change, Environment and Infrastructure committee is a body comprising six elected members which scrutinises the performance of the Welsh Government and its subsidiary bodies. One organisation that is examined is Transport for Wales, the Welsh Government wholly-owned, not-for-profit company providing support and expertise to the Welsh Government's transport projects.

Since the government decided to take over responsibility for the Wales and Borders rail franchise near the start of the Covid pandemic, TfW has had direct responsibility for oversight of the state-owned rail subsidiary Transport for Wales Rail, the train operator. The committee wished to

investigate the work of Transport for Wales in rail delivery and performance.

Three sources of expertise were invited to attend a committee hearing in November 2023 (Railfuture Wales, Transport Focus and the Community Rail Network) to provide information to and answer questions.

Prior to the hearing, Railfuture Wales submitted evidence on three topics identified by the committee. This is summarised below:

Delivery of the rail franchise and metro

The Welsh Government had no experience of rail delivery when it started the process to procure an operator for the new franchise starting in 2018.

The requirement for operators to pair up with an infrastructure provider to deliver the South East Wales Metro was a good idea. This led to more innovation in the design of the electrification scheme with a potentially lower cost.

Covid arrived just over one year into the operation of the new franchise and threw everything off course: the TOC withdrew and Welsh Govt took over responsibility for passenger services (TfW Rail). Sensibly, it retained the infrastructure partner to deliver the metro electrification.

Rail infrastructure priorities – UK and Welsh Government's

UK Government's priorities have recently greatly changed as a result of the increased costs of the High Speed 2 line. and cancellation of phase two of this project.

It now wishes to spread the infrastructure upgrades over a large geographical area. This includes North Wales. If the second phase of HS2 is to not be built, Railfuture Wales welcomes the electrification of the North Wales main line but is wary that this scheme might not be delivered, partly because it has not been fully costed and the allocated sum of £1bn may be insufficient.

The Welsh Government's rail infrastructure priorities have focussed on creation of the South East Wales metro. Electrification of these routes will deliver significant decarbonisation and possibly the greatest gain

compared to the alternative options for electrification of Welsh rail requiring a similar level of investment. The metro project is also likely to provide the largest opportunity for increasing passenger numbers. However, the passenger growth on the metro will be less than anticipated when the franchise was created as a result of more people working from home.

TfW rail performance and passenger impact

TfW Rail's performance since the majority of passengers returned to rail post Covid has been poor in terms of cancellations and punctuality. This is borne out by an examination of the performance statistics of all GB rail operators: TfW Rail has been in the bottom half of the table with regard to these two measures for the first half of 2023, the latest period for which data is published (as of Nov 2023).

However, TfW Rail has done more to restore services suspended since Covid than many operators in England and is now providing services which have not been operated in recent times, eg Ebbw Vale to Newport.

The poor quality of timetable related performance appears in part due to weaknesses in managing locomotives and rolling stock. The introduction of new trains has been slower than expected (although this has no doubt also reflected manufacturer problems). Seasoned rail managers know that new trains rarely work properly 'out of the box', and delays to their introduction into service are almost inevitable. TfW Rail's managers seem to have been over-optimistic in this respect. Issues have also arisen with the maintenance of existing trains where TfW has taken over maintenance responsibility.

It is difficult to know the impact on passenger numbers and perceptions of the above issues. However, as the majority of passenger in Wales are travelling for leisure purposes, it is likely the deterrent effect of poor performance experience on a journey will be greater than where journeys are work related as leisure journeys are more likely and able to switch to alternative modes.

A report on the outcome of the Senedd committee's investigation is awaited.

Response to consultation on new stations and trains Cardiff to Bristol and Cheltenham

Two Railfuture Wales committee members attended the exhibition mounted by Transport for Wales in late 2023 to explain its proposals for five new stations and new services between Cardiff Central and Severn Tunnel Junc. The trains would continue to Bristol TM and Cheltenham.

As the new stations would be located on the 'slow lines' of this four-track route which are predominately used by freight and have lower speed limits, questions were raised about the ability to run the additional new trains at the proposed frequency and speed as well as capacity at Cardiff Central. The scheme's programme manager visited the exhibition whilst Railfuture was present and assured everyone that these issues were being taken into account; for example, line speeds would be upgraded. The Railfuture members referred to the Burns report suggestion that fast passenger service be moved to the southern tracks but were advised that as this would create the difficulty of mixing fast passenger and slower freight services, it was unlikely to happen.

The above issue was raised when the scheme a response was sent to the consultation in January 2024 and additional comments were made about new station facilities.

FREIGHT NEWS

Beginning in North Wales, the stone traffic from Penmaenmawr continues, as does the slate traffic via Llandudno Junction. The timber flows from the Aberystwyth area also run weekly at least, and have done sometimes more often, whilst steel trains run to Dee Marsh from Port Talbot several days a week.

In West Wales, fuel trains from Robeston (Milford Haven) to Theale run regularly, but less so to Westerleigh (Bristol) recently, and these are hauled by 2 x Class 66s, as the 60s have been withdrawn from use by DB. Steel coil trains continue twice daily to Trostre from Port Talbot, with other flows from Trostre to Tilbury, and scrap to Port Talbot from Trostre. Other steel traffic runs to Round Oak (Dudley) and Llanwern from Margam, the latter several times per day. The timber trains from Baglan to Chirk, operated by Class 56s normally run three to four times a week at present.

Although the Fros Y Fran (Merthyr) opencast mine ceased to extract coal as from the end of November, trains continued during December to clear the stock, and then a surprise, a ship arrived in Cardiff Docks, and two trains a day on weekdays and one I believe on Saturdays operated for a few weeks in January. Since then, a new flow of coal, imported through Immingham, has begun running once daily, arriving Margam steel works late evening and leaving empty for the return north in the early hours, so I have been told. NB See photo of special charter train leaving the Fros Y Fran/ Cwmbargoed branch on page 16.

Celsa at Cardiff also continues to have several trains a week, with scrap metal arriving and finished products leaving. Machen quarry traffic has been sporadic of late, although Saturdays seem to be regular. Finally, the Tesco Daventry to Wentloog containers run twice daily, with a reintroduced Wentloog to Southampton mixed customer container train sometimes being fully loaded, or well loaded. The daily Wentloog to London Gateway container train continues.

Rhodri Evans

NEWSLINES

GWR news

At GWR's Wales Local Transport Forum in early March, it was announced that the June timetable change will see the introduction of two new S Wales services non-stop from Paddington to Bristol Parkway in the Monday to Friday peak hours. The new trains will relieve overcrowding on the existing all stations London- South Wales services at these times which will continue to operate. The new service will reach Cardiff Central 1hr 45 minutes after departing Paddington and will provide the fastest service between the UK and Welsh capitals since the early days of the High Speed Trains in the late 1970s/early 1980s when some trains ran non-stop from Newport to London. The summer Saturday train on the Tenby/Pembroke Dock branch will return this year.

North Wales Transport Commission

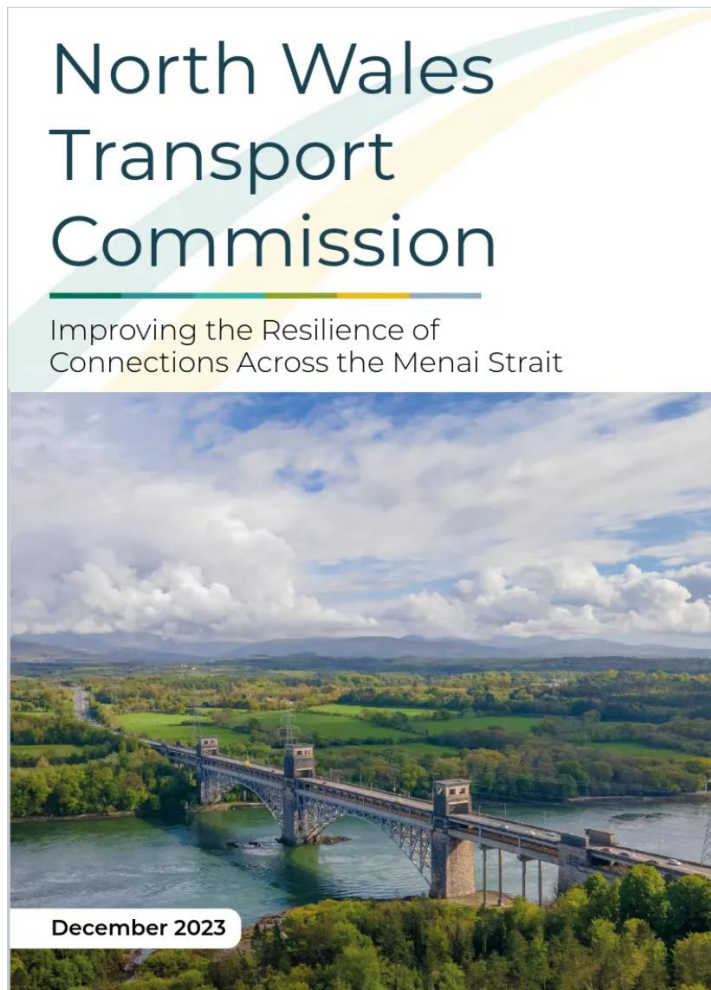
The Commission published its report in November 2023 which included recommendations on the crossings of the Menai Straits. Railfuture Wales had commented on this from a 'make greater use of rail' perspective in early 2023 (see Rail Wales 74 page 10).

The Commission's findings are summarised here:

<https://www.gov.wales/north-wales-transport-commission>.

On the challenge posed by the Menai Straits the Commission concluded:

'Improving public transport and active travel is important to help reduce the volume of motor traffic using the bridges. The Commission thinks this can be achieved by improving rail services from Llanfair PG, improving bus frequency across the bridges, and providing active travel routes across the bridges and beyond that are comfortable, attractive, and safe.'



Get this document from

<https://www.gov.wales/north-wales-transport-commission-menai-strait-transport-connections>

Thanks are extended to all who contributed to this issue. In all cases, any opinions expressed are those of the contributors, and do not necessarily represent *Railfuture* policy. Material for the next issue – articles, letters, photos or comments – should be sent to the editor, Peter Kingsbury at peter.kingsbury@railfuturewales.org.uk or by post to 22 Winchester Avenue, Penylan, Cardiff CF23 9BT, by 31st August 2024 for the autumn 2024 issue. The editor may edit letters for publication.

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The passing of time in the South Wales valleys is illustrated in this view. A special train comprising mark 2 carriages waits to leave the Cwmbargoed freight branch at Ystrad Mynach on the 8th March. This Pathfinder tours excursion had originated in Burton upon Trent and visited the last route in the valleys which, until recently, carried locally extracted coal. In the meantime, a Stadler Flirt class 231 train leaves the platform for Cardiff. Caerphilly Council aspires to see passenger services introduced on the branch as far as Nelson.

Photo: Bill Riggs

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