

Enterprise & Learning Committee

EL(3) 04-07(p5) Annex 1 : 26 September 2007

Petition to reopen Carno railway station

Background

At its meeting on 11 July, Members considered the petition to reopen Carno railway station, which had been remitted to the Committee by the Petitions Committee. Members felt that the case presented required careful and detailed consideration and therefore resolved to take evidence from the petitioners and key stakeholders at a future meeting in Carno. The Committee met in Carno on 4 September at the Carno Community Centre. Members were impressed with the facilities and the welcome afforded them and wish to express their appreciation. The Committee took evidence from the following: Petitioners for the reopening of Carno railway station: Tony Burton - Principal Petitioner, Carno Station Action Group Powys County Council: Philip Jackson - Transport and Development Control Manager Network Rail: Mike Gallop - Route Enhancement Manager; Ian Baxter - Senior Commercial Scheme Sponsor Arriva Trains Wales: Mike Bagshaw - Commercial Director Welsh Assembly Government: Tim James - Head of Rail Unit The Committee records its gratitude to the witnesses for providing oral and written evidence. A record of the meeting and papers considered are attached as an annex to this report. The Principal Petitioner also provided further evidence following the meeting, which is also annexed.

Introduction

The key issues which emerged from the evidence were: Need and passenger demand for the new station Technical feasibility Costs Impact on rail services

Need and passenger demand

The Committee received written evidence from the Carno Station Action Group showing that the estimated passenger demand for the new station at Carno would be 11,175 single journeys per annum, of which 6,478 would be drawn from existing users of Caersws station. Network Rail stated that these figures equated to about 30 passengers a day in total using the new station, of which about 14 would be new rail passengers. Network Rail said that opening a new station that would 'abstract' passengers from an existing station was contrary to Department of Transport principles. The Carno Station Action Group argued that in the light of increasing concerns about climate change, the reduction in car journeys resulting from passengers who currently travel to Caersws should be taken into account when considering the merits of the case. They also put forward the case for a station at Carno to 'kick start' regeneration of the area following the closure of the Laura Ashley factory. The Group also suggested that a station would encourage 'green tourism' in the area. The Welsh Assembly Government told the Committee that a formal business case for the new station would have to be made and any bid for funding would have to be considered alongside other new station proposals across Wales. The Committee were told of examples where new stations have been or are being built elsewhere in Wales with much larger catchment populations, although it was stated that it is not Assembly Government policy to discriminate on population size when considering business cases for opening stations. The Committee's view is that it would be difficult to justify the case for a new station at Carno on the estimated number of new passengers alone. However, there may be a case linked to the wider objectives of supporting a rural community and encouraging the regeneration of an area that has suffered from the closure of the Laura Ashley factory and a resulting loss of local employment. The fact that Carno is positioned on a stretch of line between Caersws and Machynlleth where there is no station for a distance of more than 20 miles (and is six miles from the nearest station at Caersws to the east) adds further weight to the argument for a new station at this location. Much would depend on the

cost of providing the new station and what impact it would have on a potential hourly service. A formal business case needs to be developed.

Technical feasibility

There are two main issues: the location of the passing loop to be provided as part of the infrastructure improvements being funded by Network Rail and the Welsh Assembly Government in order to make it possible to provide an hourly service on the Cambrian Line and linked to the introduction of the ERTMS signalling system; the suitability of the site at Carno for a railway station given modern HMRI safety standards.

Carno or Talerddig loop

The Carno Station Action Group told the Committee that there was a case for locating the passing loop at Carno so that the train that stops in the loop can allow passengers to board and alight, rather than stopping in the open countryside at Talerddig. They also argued that the loop at Carno was more central to the line as a whole and was therefore more desirable in operational terms as it would improve punctuality. Arriva Trains Wales agreed that a loop at Carno would allow "a small optimisation [of] timetabling and performance because its location is favourable to Talerddig in terms of its position on the route in relation to other passing points". Network Rail considered the option of a loop at Carno during the feasibility studies commissioned by the Welsh Assembly Government that were carried out for the infrastructure enhancement project. This option was rejected in favour of enhancing the existing loop at Talerddig. Network Rail said in their written evidence that "insufficient performance benefits [of a loop at Carno] exist when compared to the retention of Talerddig". The Committee was told by Network Rail and the Welsh Assembly Government that the ERTMS pilot project on the Cambrian Line represented a unique opportunity to deliver other improvements to the infrastructure that would enhance performance and reliability. These enhancements would also allow the future introduction of an hourly service, subject to the necessary funding becoming available. Network Rail explained that they had included a loop at Carno as part of one infrastructure enhancement option. However this had subsequently been excluded from the GRIP4 single option development stage. The Carno Station Action Group expressed concern that the reasons why the Carno loop option was left out of the GRIP4 study had not been explained to them. The Committee heard from Network Rail and the Welsh Assembly Government that a decision to proceed with the infrastructure enhancement project had to be taken by the end of July 2007 in order to allow this project to be integrated with the signalling work for the ERTMS pilot project on the Cambrian line. The ERTMS project, because it is a pilot project of 'national significance', has a fixed completion deadline of December 2008. This is the reason why the Deputy First Minister announced on 8 August that funding for the infrastructure enhancement project would be made available. This funding is based on Network Rail's selected option of an enhanced existing loop at Talerddig and an extended loop at Welshpool.

HMRI station standards

Network Rail told the Committee that a new station at Carno would require derogations from design standards relating to gradients and line curvature set by Her Majesty's Rail Inspectorate (HMRI). Such derogations were only possible in exceptional cases. These standards were different to those applied to the provision of a passing loop. Network Rail said that the position of the station site on a continuous steep gradient over 7 miles from Caersws made the site unsuitable for a station and would affect performance. Arriva Trains Wales stated that they were concerned about this from an operational point of view. The Carno Station Action Group pointed out that there had been a station previously at this site and the original station building still exists. Also the station site itself is level over a length of 400 metres.

Costs

The Committee heard from Network Rail that they considered the costs of the new loop at Carno to be £0.6 million higher than those for the retention and enhancement of the Talerddig loop. The need to retain the engineer's siding at Talerddig was another factor that would increase costs if the Carno loop was also to be built. Both options require a longer passing loop to be constructed at Welshpool, but the Talerddig option requires this loop to be extended west by a further two miles. The Carno Station Action Group told the Committee that the additional costs of maintenance associated with extra two miles of track in the Welshpool loop had not been taken into account and if this was included then the wholelife project costs associated with the Carno loop option would be about 10 per cent less than the Talerddig option. They also suggested that an alternative engineer's siding could be provided using an old track bed at Carno. The Carno Station Action Group estimated the cost of a new station with two 10 metre platforms to be about £350,000. This estimate was based on the costs of the station at Beaulieu, near Inverness in Scotland that opened in 2002. They argued that the proximity of the level crossing provided the means for passengers, including those with disabilities, to access either platform. Although 10 metre platforms would be shorter than the length of the trains likely to call, they pointed out that at Beaulieu the use of a similar short platform had been successful, with the conductor of the train selectively opening the doors required. Network Rail provided an estimated cost of £5 million for providing a new station at Carno. The Welsh Assembly Government estimated the cost to be between £4 million and £5 million. These estimates are based on two platforms long enough to accommodate four car trains, a footbridge providing access to both platforms in compliance with the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 and safety improvements to the level crossing. Network Rail stated that opening a new station with short platforms such as at Beaulieu station would not now be permissible for safety reasons and that the platforms would therefore need to be as long as the longest train likely to call. They also made it clear that providing access to either platform via the level crossing was not possible due to safety concerns arising from passengers crossing the line. A footbridge, including ramps for disabled access is the alternative. Enhancing the half barrier level crossing would also be necessary. The Committee's view is that there may have been some operational benefits of locating the loop at Carno rather than at Talerddig. The costs of the two loop options are also not significantly different and the Carno option had the potential benefit of providing a new station rather than stopping trains in the open countryside. However given the timing constraints imposed by Network Rail and the ERTMS project, it is now too late to ask the Welsh Assembly Government to reconsider its decision to proceed with the infrastructure enhancement project with an enhanced loop at Talerddig.

Impact on rail services

Network Rail stated in its written evidence that a new station at Carno will compromise the timetable and performance benefits delivered by the enhanced infrastructure. "Insertion of an additional station call at Carno instead of passing through the loop at line speed [65 mph] would compromise all the output benefits realised by the infrastructure enhancement project." Network Rail also told the Committee that in its view the Cambrian Line is a fast link from mid Wales to the English border and on to the West Midlands. Arriva Trains Wales agreed that the line is predominantly "a fast, interurban line that serves a number of key communities that act as rail heads to smaller communities". Arriva Trains Wales suggested that even the addition of one stop along the length of the Cambrian Line would significantly affect performance and discourage users. However no specific evidence was provided that an extra station would necessarily put people off travelling on this line. Network Rail said: "We would take some convincing as to the benefit of any new station on this line." Powys County Council said that they supported the "aspirations of the local community" at Carno, subject only to this not compromising the introduction of the hourly service and the continued growth in rail traffic on the Cambrian Line. The Carno Station Action Group put forward the idea that a new station at Carno could be served by a twohourly service, if and when the hourly service is introduced. This idea is set out in more detail in further evidence provided by the Group after the meeting on 4 September (see Annex A). However at the meeting the principal petitioner acknowledged that this idea could be problematic. This is because a stop for a station would be likely to be longer than a stop in a passing loop and in order to maintain the timetable it would be necessary for those trains stopping

at Carno to not stop at Caersws. In other words if and when the hourly service is established, trains would continue to stop only once every two hours at Caersws if a two-hourly stop was also introduced at Carno. This idea is also dependent on the building of a new passing loop at Carno. The Committee heard from the Carno Station Action Group that both Network Rail and the Welsh Assembly Government had previously told the Group that the location of the loop at Talerddig "would neither make it easier to reopen the station at Carno nor make it more difficult". The Group did not believe that this was the case and argued that locating the loop at Carno rather than Talerddig was the only way to provide an hourly service on the Cambrian Line without delays. The Group has raised this issue again in its further evidence (see Annex A). The Welsh Assembly Government told the Committee that the design for the infrastructure enhancement project had been "future proofed" with some capacity built into it, including the possibility of locating a new station at Carno. The Head of the Assembly Government's Rail Unit told the Committee: "To answer your specific question on what future-proofing we did, it was for a station in the vicinity of between Dyfi and Machynlleth, for an hourly service, and for a station at Carno or any other location on a single line where standards would allow that." The Committee detected a difference of opinion between Network Rail, who were not in favour of any additional stations on the Cambrian Line, and the Welsh Assembly Government who had 'futureproofed' the infrastructure enhancements to enable some additional stations to be provided. The Committee's view is that the Cambrian Line is a 'social railway' serving the rural communities of mid Wales as well as providing a link between the west coast and the Midlands. The Committee supports the introduction of an hourly service on the Cambrian Line as soon possible after the infrastructure enhancements have been completed and any new stations should not compromise the performance or reliability of this service. The Committee considers that it may still be possible to provide a single platform station at Carno that would enable a two-hourly service to be provided without a detrimental effect on the service as a whole. This point needs to be clarified (see Recommendation 3). A new single platform station at Carno could probably be provided at a much lower cost than a two platform station, because it is assumed that for a single platform a footbridge would not be required. Such a station would however have to be capable of meeting current safety standards and would need to comply with the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Acts.

Conclusions

Having evaluated the evidence, the Committee agreed to lay its report before the Assembly. The Chair would write to the Minister for Economy and Transport requesting that he consider the report and implement its recommendations. The Committee requests that the Minister provides a formal response no later than 30 days from the laying of this report and that he attend a future meeting of the Committee to be scrutinised on his response. Further, the Committee requests that a protocol be developed to ensure that no Ministerial announcements, which may prejudice the outcome of the consideration of a petition before the Assembly and thus undermine the democratic process, are made until the Assembly's consideration has ended.

Recommendations:

The Committee:

1. Welcomes the decision to proceed with the Cambrian Line infrastructure enhancement project and urges the Welsh Assembly Government to provide the necessary funding for an hourly service on the line as soon as possible after the infrastructure work has been completed.
2. Supports the view that safety must be a primary concern in the provision of any new railway infrastructure.
3. Asks the Minister to confirm that, following completion of the infrastructure enhancement project, it would still be possible to accommodate a single platform station at Carno without compromising the performance or reliability of a future hourly service on the Cambrian Line.
4. Asks that the Minister's officials provide support to the Carno Station Action Group in developing and submitting a formal business case for such a station.

5. Considers that the position of Carno on a stretch of line between Caersws and Machynlleth where there is no station for a distance of more than 20 miles adds considerable weight to the case for a new station at this location.
6. Asks Network Rail to provide advice to the Carno Station Action Group on how such a station could be constructed to meet current HMRI standards.
7. Asks the Minister to publish general guidance on preparing business cases for the opening of new stations in Wales, including guidance on what the potential costs could be.
8. Asks the Minister to clarify the Assembly Government's view of the future role of the Cambrian Line - as an inter-urban service or one that also serves rural communities in mid Wales.