

THE CARNO STATION RE-OPENING CAMPAIGN

The first seeds of the campaign to re-open Carno station were sown in 1995, when the Carno Community Council wrote to Railtrack in support of re-opening. Next year, following representations by local councillor Evan Davies, Powys County Council Highways Committee considered the issue and resolved to fund half of a (£10k) feasibility study if the rail industry would match this amount. However, the Train Operating Company (TOC), then Central Trains, was in the run up to privatisation and unable to make any financial commitment. Railtrack provided a detailed response to enquiries in 1997, advising that the cost (which they could not meet themselves) for a single platform scheme would be “around £500k”.

Formation of Carno Station Action Group

There was then a lull in activities until 2002, when the Carno Station Action Group was formed. The Group's inaugural meeting was held in the Community Centre with guest speaker Gareth Marston, the then SARPA chairman. In the early years the group concentrated on building contact with Powys County Council and the new Wales TOC, Arriva Trains Wales, but little concrete could be achieved in the absence of funding for the feasibility study.

The campaign for Carno station re-opening has long been conducted against the backdrop of the much wider campaign for an hourly service on the Cambrian line, which dates back many years. Proposals for an hourly service were first articulated by the Welsh Assembly in its 'Vision for Rail' map within “The Transport Framework for Wales” (Nov.2001), but it was not until 2006 that the Welsh Government initiated the first move to bring it about, when it commissioned a study from Network Rail of options for the necessary infrastructure enhancements.

Mike Gallop of Network Rail gave a progress report on the study at a meeting in Machynlleth on August 4th and gave details of 6 different combinations of locations at which trains would pass that were under consideration. This led SARPA to write to the Welsh Government urging that passing locations selected should only be at existing stations or at promising sites for new stations, such as Carno.

A new passing loop at Carno?

Network Rail presented the results of the Cambrian Hourly Service 'GRIP 3' Option Selection Study to a meeting of stakeholders in Porthmadoc on November 24th 2006. Two options were selected to go forward to GRIP 4, with trains passing at either a new loop at Dyfi Junction, Talerddig and a new 4.2 km Dynamic Loop W of Welshpool (Option 1 (i)) or at Dyfi Junction, a new loop at Carno and a shorter 2.3 km Dynamic Loop at Welshpool (Option 1 (ii)).

The group recognised that the possibility of relocating Talerddig loop to Carno would be a very promising development, as station stops at Carno would be possible without causing trains extra delay. However there was a major setback on March 12th 2007, when Ian Baxter of Network Rail advised the group that the GRIP 4 study, which the Welsh Government had instructed Network Rail to commence, would only be taking forward Option 1 (i), with trains crossing at Talerddig. Carno Community Council Clerk Alan Humphreys was shocked and responded with the question “What on earth is the point of stopping trains in the middle of a field 28 times a day, when those same trains could stop to pass at Carno and pick up passengers at the same time?” The group was galvanised into action and representations were made to the Welsh Government, TraCC [Trafnidiaeth

Canolbarth Cymru, the Regional Transport Consortium], Powys County Council and Arriva Trains Wales that Network Rail should develop the Carno loop option instead.

Events then started moving quickly. A public meeting was held on April 4th in the community centre with guest speakers Cllr Gwilym Evans, Chairman of TraCC, and Mick Bates AM. Cllr Evans said he had been impressed by the strength of the Case for Re-opening submitted by the action group, and confirmed that TraCC would press for Carno's case to be considered by the Welsh Assembly Government. He added that TraCC backed the repositioning of the existing Talerddig passing loop at Carno. Mick Bates AM started by looking at sustainability in relation to transport but went on to point out that the next few months were crucial in the campaign, because the Welsh Assembly Government would take a decision on the infrastructure for the hourly service in July or August. He recommended the action group act without delay to send a large petition to the Minister and set up a website.

Petition to National Assembly

Although the website took two months to set up, the group took up the petition suggestion with alacrity, with members going out collecting signatures throughout the village and in Llanbrynmair (the next village to the West, which would also benefit from a station at Carno) until nearly 800 had been collected! The petition read "We call upon the Welsh Assembly Government to re-open Carno Station and end the wasteful practice of stopping trains outside Talerddig with no passenger benefit".

Separately well over a hundred residents posed as prospective passengers for a photograph in front of Carno station on the morning of April 15th to witness to the growing support for the station re-opening campaign.

Mick Bates arranged for a formal handover of the petition to the Presiding Office of the National Assembly, Lord Dafydd Elis Thomas on June 12th and a small contingent travelled down to Cardiff Bay to take part.



The timing was perfect, because the National Assembly had only just set up a petitions system for Wales and the newly formed Petitions Committee considered the petition at its first meeting on July 4th. The committee gave a favourable reception to the Carno petition, with Mike German and other committee members complimenting the action group on presenting a well-argued case. In her opening remarks, Chairman Val Lloyd alluded to a last minute submission - a photograph of the Talerddig loop and the glorious surrounding countryside – sent to illustrate Talerddig’s remoteness! After discussion, the committee decided to refer the petition to the Enterprise and Learning Committee, whose remit included transport, for detailed consideration.

The Enterprise and Learning Committee considered the petition at their next meeting on July 11th. In the meantime, Carno Station Action Group had submitted further written evidence to the committee, including a Cost Benefit Analysis, and committee members commented favourably on the quality of the case that had been put before them. After discussion, the committee decided to travel to Carno to see the station site for themselves and to hold a hearing in the village on the re-opening proposal. The date for the Committee hearing in Carno was set for September 4th.

Minister announces retention of Talerddig loop

In view of the anticipated imminent Ministerial announcement on the infrastructure enhancements for the hourly service, local AM Mick Bates, Mid and West Wales AM Alun Davies and Petitions Committee member Mike German AM all wrote to the Minister asking him to defer a decision on precise passing loop locations until after the Committee hearing. Nevertheless on August 8th the Minister, Ieuan Wyn Jones, officially announced that the infrastructure enhancements were to go ahead with retention of the Talerddig loop. Naturally the group were incensed that this decision on the passing loop location would pre-empt the Committee’s deliberations on the station petition and wrote to the Minister pointing out the resulting damage to the petitions process.

Enterprise and Learning Committee hearing in Carno

Four members of the Enterprise and Learning Committee took part in the hearing in Carno on September 4th – Jeff Cuthbert (Caerphilly), Alun Davies, Gareth Jones (Aberconwy) – Chair and Mick Bates (Montgomeryshire) and heard evidence from Mike Bagshaw (Commercial Director, Arriva Trains Wales), Ian Baxter (Senior Commercial Scheme Sponsor, Network Rail), Tony Burton (Principal Petitioner, Petitioners for the reopening of Carno railway station), Mike Gallop (Route Enhancement Manager, Network Rail), Philip Jackson (Transport and Development Control Manager, Powys County Council) and Tim James (Head of Rail Unit, Welsh Assembly Government).

Network Rail gave their evidence in the context of their recent decision against relocating the Talerddig loop at Carno as part of infrastructure improvements needed for an hourly service. They argued that the primary reason for the decision was one of cost – citing a £0.6 m higher cost for constructing a new loop at Carno as against enhancing the Talerddig loop.

In relation to the opening of a station at a new Carno loop, it was pointed out that the intention at both Talerddig and Carno was that one train should stop in the loop and the other pass through without stopping and so “insertion of an additional station call at Carno instead of passing through the loop at linespeed would compromise all the output benefits realised by the Infrastructure Enhancement project”. This assertion failed to recognise the fact that CSAG was (and is) campaigning for a 2 hourly service rather than an hourly one.

Network Rail stated that demand at Carno could not generate a positive business case in relation to an expenditure of £5 m – the sum they estimated would be required for a 2 platform station with a footbridge - and dismissed the possibility of constructing very short platforms as at Beaulieu in Scotland as unacceptable. Again they failed to acknowledge that only one platform would be needed for a 2 hourly service.

The four committee members posed many pertinent questions to the witnesses during cross-questioning and the whole transcript repays a careful reading. In particular, they asked why the decision on loop locations could not have been delayed until after the Committee hearing. Network Rail responded that the infrastructure enhancements had to be integrated with ERTMS implementation, so the decision had to be made by the end of July. The hearing lasted three and a quarter hours in total.

The Enterprise and Learning Committee published their Report on the hearing on September 20th. They concluded that it would be difficult to justify the case for a new station at Carno on the estimated number of new passengers alone, but that “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. A formal business case needs to be developed.” Among the recommendations was one that asked the Minister’s officials to “provide support to the Carno Station Action Group in developing and submitting a formal business case for such a station.”

The Minister, Ieuan Wyn Jones, responded to the Committee’s recommendations on November 9th. The responses were generally non-committal but pointed out that it was the role of the Regional Transport Consortia, WAG, ATW and Network Rail to develop formal business cases and recommended CSAG to engage with TraCC.

Scrutiny of the Minister

The Enterprise & Learning Committee were due to question the Minister on his responses at a Scrutiny Meeting on 14th November, 2007, so CSAG hired a minibus to transport fifteen supporters

to Cardiff to watch the proceedings. During the meeting, the Minister was questioned about the impact retention of the Talerddig loop would have on the feasibility of re-opening Carno station and responded "I want to give that reassurance again that the work that is currently being done, and the way that it is being done, does not compromise the provision of a station in Carno at some future point."

In relation to the business case, Mr Tim James, Head of Rail, who accompanied the Minister at the session, stated that the Welsh Government "had told TraCC that it should lead the process" of developing the business case, and "that the people of Carno should provide evidence for that business case". He also said of the TraCC Regional Transport plan then being prepared that WAG "would look to see Carno as a priority within such a plan".

At the conclusion of the meeting, the Committee Chair, Gareth Jones said "As a mark of respect to the action group in Carno, I believe that it is to be warmly congratulated on the way in which it has presented this case to us, and to the Assembly. Its objectives in relation to the community and what it expects in terms of development in this part of mid Wales are in line with our objectives and aspirations as the Welsh Assembly Government. I am sure that I speak on behalf of all members of this committee when I say that we will be declaring our support for what they wish to see, namely the reopening of the station in Carno."

The Carno Transport Appraisal

Encouraged by the invitation to provide evidence for the business case, CSAG immediately set about the preparation of its own draft business case in line with Welsh Transport Appraisal Guidance (WelTAG) for submission to TraCC. Based on a station capital cost of £1 million for a single, 4 carriage long platform, a benefit cost ratio of over 1.6 was obtained. The 62 page report, entitled the Carno Transport Appraisal was presented to the TraCC chairman, Cllr Gwilym Evans, at County Hall, Llandrindod Wells on July 1st, 2008.

There followed a period of over a year in which TraCC neither took ownership of the Carno Transport Appraisal, nor carried out any work to refine it. CSAG found it extremely frustrating that the commitments made at the scrutiny session on November 14th, 2007 were not being carried out. It was apparent that TraCC had not received any dedicated funding for the appraisal of Carno Station and were unwilling to use their own funds for the work. Moreover, the TraCC Provisional Regional Transport Plan, which appeared in December 2008, failed to include the re-opening of Carno station as a priority and merely suggested that it should be considered in a future "all-line" rail study.

Cardiff delegation

Eventually the group decided that there was no option but to re-engage with the National Assembly, so a delegation travelled to Cardiff on June 24th, 2009, and met with the chair of the Enterprise & Learning Committee and other interested AMs to complain about TraCC's failure to initiate a formal station appraisal. The AMs were sympathetic and agreed to approach the Minister on CSAG's behalf. The opportunity was also taken to meet with Mr Tim James, now Head of Integrated Public Transport at WAG, who undertook to arrange a meeting between TraCC, WAG and CSAG to try to get things moving again.

"All-line" rail study

The TraCC/WAG/CSAG meeting was held in Newtown on August 6th, 2009. CSAG were informed that TraCC had now secured WAG funding for its "all-line" rail study, which would include Stage 1

WelTAG appraisals of possible infrastructure improvements, including the re-opening of Carno station. WAG also gave a commitment, that on completion of this study, they would fund a Stage 2 WelTAG appraisal of Carno station which would enable them to take the decision as to whether the scheme should go ahead or not.

Alternative station site

The "All-line" rail study was carried out by Capita Symonds over the period November 2009 – April 2010. Capita Symonds visited Carno in November to view the site and meet representatives of CSAG. This led to the identification of an alternative site for the station at the East end of the village, about one kilometre from the former site at the West end adjacent to the level crossing on the Cwm LLwyd road. In view of the costs of modifying the operation of the automatic level crossing barriers to cater for trains stopping at the station, Capita Symonds based their indicative costings on the Eastern site. The WelTAG Stage 1 appraisal concluded that the financial Benefit Cost Ratio of re-opening Carno station would be 0.75, which TraCC considered was high enough to justify more detailed evaluation.

Stage 1+2 WelTAG appraisal

A further TraCC/WAG/CSAG meeting was held in Newtown on April 27th, 2010, at which Tim James accepted TraCC's recommendation to proceed to a Stage 2 appraisal of both Carno and Bow Street stations straightaway. Accordingly TraCC commissioned Capita Symonds to carry out a WelTAG Stage 1+2 appraisal of the re-opening of the two stations.

Work began on the WelTAG Stage 2 appraisal in June 2010, with completion predicted in autumn 2010. However, the work was considerably delayed – largely through difficulties in setting up a meeting with Network Rail - and the final version of the report was completed not completed until May 24th, 2011.

Capita Symonds held three stakeholder meeting in Carno to report the progress of their work on July 14th & September 9th, 2010 and March 24th, 2011. Scrutiny of the benefit and cost tables presented at the meetings led to the identification of several errors, but although these were eventually rectified, Capita Symonds showed reluctance to engage in dialogue with CSAG on the details of their Benefit Cost analysis.

At a late stage in the appraisal process (March 2011), account was taken of the effect of possible lost through journeys on overall economic benefits for the first time, at the request of the WAG transport economist. This reduced the Benefit Cost Ratio of Carno Station from 1.15 to 0.46, but the validity of the estimate that 3800 through passengers would be lost per year, used in the Benefit Cost Ratio calculation, is very much in doubt. In view of this, the final version of the report presented both values.

TraCC was hoping to have an opportunity to present the WelTAG appraisal to the Minister, but was unable to arrange a suitable meeting.

A joint delegation of Carno and Bow Street station campaigners travelled to Cardiff on November 8th and met with local and regional AMs to brief them before they, in turn, met the Minister, Carl Sargeant the following day.

Responsibility for new stations

In the afternoon the delegation met Tim James, to try to establish where the responsibility for implementing plans for new stations lay. He advised that the place for Carno and Bow Street stations was in the Regional Transport Plan (RTP), not the NTP. He was therefore asked how a consortium like TraCC, which only had a budget of about £3 m per annum for implementation of its RTP, could contemplate including stations costing £1.5 m each in its RTP without pushing all the usual schemes out. He replied that, if the Welsh Government was to support these and subject to affordability and other RTP priorities, any extra funding would come from the Welsh Government to enable such projects to be accommodated within the Consortium budget through a bidding process. In other words, if it is larger expenditure, the WG can and do provide additional funding.

TraCC presentation in Carno

At CSAG's request, TraCC gave a presentation of the WelTAG appraisal at a public meeting in Carno on November 14th, 2011. There was a very large turnout, with over 170 people attending. TraCC chairman, Councillor Trevor Roberts, told the audience that TraCC were fully behind the opening of Carno station and that, subject to resolution of funding with the Welsh Government, he could see no reason why the station could not open within three years. However, AM Russell George told the meeting that the Minister, Carl Sergeant, had told him that TraCC should progress the station rather than WG, despite TraCC's understanding that rail schemes – whether of national or regional significance - were the responsibility of the Welsh Government. It was clear that the funding conundrum was now the chief obstacle.

Refinement of the Business Case

In view of this, improvement of the business case was clearly a worthwhile objective. Research by CSAG identified three areas where costs had been exaggerated in the WelTAG appraisal:

- The station capital cost contained a substantial element to raise the station car park to reduce flood risk, but the Environment Agency Wales subsequently advised against raising the station car park above the flood level as had been recommended by Capita Symonds, resulting in a 14% saving on the original £1.7m capital cost.
- The cost of the station could be reduced by a further 6% if the car park was constructed by Powys County Council rather than by Network Rail.
- Information obtained from Arriva Trains Wales from the Ebbw Vale line indicated that annual station running costs were likely to be £21k, rather than the £35k assumed by Capita Symonds.

Following the appointment of Edwina Hart as Transport Minister in March 2013, CSAG requested a meeting to discuss flaws in the WelTAG and to flag up opportunities presented by the re-development of the old Laura Ashley site. This meeting, which took place in October, resulted in an offer of collaborative working between CSAG and the WG transport economist to refine the WelTAG business case. The outcome of this collaboration was the completion in June 2014 of an agreed revised Business Case demonstrating a Benefit Cost Ratio (BCR) of 1.65. This was based on a reappraisal of the predicted number of lost through journeys, the new data on station operating costs, identification of errors in the original BCR calculation and reduction of the car park capital cost.

Meeting with Edwina Hart in Carno

CSAG were optimistic that the improved BCR would lead to the inclusion of Carno station in the 2015-2020 National Transport Plan, but when the draft appeared in December, no new stations were included at all. However, Edwina Hart agreed to travel to Carno to meet the group on February

12th 2015 to discuss prospects for the station and indicated at the meeting that the door was not closed.

On February 14th, a Saturday drop-in session was held at Carno Community Centre at which residents were invited to write to the Minister urging station re-opening or sign one of three different letters that had been drafted beforehand. There was an impressive turn out, but the Minister did not attempt to respond to all her correspondents.

Station siting

Another outcome of the dialogue with the Minister was reconsideration of the preferred station site, in the light of proposals for redevelopment of the Laura Ashley site and the possible establishment of a Laura Ashley museum in the former station building. She was clearly open to the possibility of closing the Cwm Llwyd level crossing – either by building a road diversion to meet the A470 to the West of the existing A470 bridge over the railway or by constructing a new bridge – and asked CSAG to undertake a comprehensive survey of Carno and Llanbrynmair residents to determine their preference. There was a very high level of response to the survey, which took place in March 2014, and people favoured the former station site as opposed to the new one at the East of the village by a large margin.

Since the survey took place, the Laura Ashley site has been bought by West Yorkshire Fellmongers Ltd. The old schoolhouse has been refurbished and it is understood that parts of the site adjacent to the station are to be redeveloped for housing. It is hoped that the station building may become available for the proposed museum.

Accommodation of Carno stops within enhanced train service

Given the eagerly anticipated introduction of the enhanced Cambrian Line train service in May 2015, CSAG were aware of the importance of demonstrating that stops at Carno could be incorporated into the new timetable. To this end the group proposed an amended version of the new timetable with Carno stops inserted and submitted it to WG officials for consideration by Arriva Trains Wales. Unfortunately ATW concluded that the schedule as at May 2015 was too tight to allow an additional stop at Carno. This came as a surprise, as the CSAG draft timetable, in which not all trains would stop at Carno, was based on existing sectional running times, with the three minute delay due to the Carno stop coming from a reduction in the lengthy 10 to 15 minute layover of trains at Shrewsbury.

In order to resolve the question, Edwina Hart commissioned independent technical advice from PRA Operations Planning Limited. They devised a modified timetable which accommodated 5 Eastbound and 8 Westbound stops at Carno, but recommended against the opening of Carno station on a widespread basis without infrastructure enhancements.

Next steps

In a separate development, CSAG has invited all the bidders for the new Welsh Franchise to meet with the group for a briefing in the expectation that they will wish to include the opening of the station in their bids.

Clearly the thrust of the campaign from now on must focus on the accommodation of Carno stops within the timetable. Accordingly it is continuing its dialogue with the Welsh Government on this issue with a view to engagement with industry timetable planners on the detail.

Conclusion

As the reader who has got this far will appreciate, the Carno station re-opening campaign has followed a long and tortuous road, with many obstacles in its path. Chief among these has been the skill of the Welsh Government and the Regional Transport Consortium, TraCC, in deflecting responsibility for progressing the station to the other arm of government. Nevertheless we have succeeded in demonstrating an excellent business case, which has been agreed with the Welsh Government economist. This shows a Benefit Cost Ratio of 1.65, excluding wider economic benefits, which exceeds the corresponding figure of 1.4 for Phase 1 of HS2 (The Economic Case for HS2, Department for Transport, October 2013).

A postscript on the controversial decision to retain Talerddig loop from Ian Baxter of Network Rail: "While the Talerddig loop decision did not help the Carno station cause, it did not hinder it either" reported from the Cambrian Line Liaison Committee Meeting - Friday July 27th 2007.

Tony Burton February 27th, 2017

ADDENDUM –TALERDDIG VS CARNO LOOP COSTS

There remain questions surrounding the decision to retain the crossing loop at Talerddig rather than relocate it at Carno. Network Rail made it clear that the main reason was cost - the total of the GRIP 4 Capital and Risk Costs for the Carno Option 1(ii) being £0.8 m greater than for the Talerddig Option 1(i) - see Table below. However, Network Rail appear to have ignored entirely the extra maintenance costs of the longer Welshpool dynamic loop required in conjunction with Talerddig loop retention. On the assumption that the maintenance cost per mile of track on the Cambrian line is half the UK average, the extra annual maintenance cost for the 2 km longer dynamic loop is £41 k, which results in an extra discounted whole-life maintenance cost of £1.1 m over 60 yrs.

Passing loop pattern	Total Capital Cost £m	Risk Costs £m	Total of Capital and Risk Costs £m	Extra whole-life maintenance cost £m	Capital + Risk + extra maintenance cost £m
Option 1(i) Talerddig	11.6	3.2	14.8	1.1	15.9
Option 1(ii) Carno	12.6	3,1	15.6	0	15.6

Comparison of Option 1(i) and Option 1(ii) Hourly Service Infrastructure Costs