

Petition: Improve Rail Services for Chepstow

Y Pwyllgor Deisebau | 9 Hydref 2018
Petitions Committee | 9 October 2018

Research Briefing:

Petition Number: P-05-833

Petition title: Improve Rail Services for Chepstow

Text of petition:

We call on the National Assembly for Wales to urge the Welsh Government to reconsider the franchise agreement for the new Wales and Border Rail operator to improve the level of service being offered to Chepstow. This is particularly important as Cross Country Trains will be withdrawing their present service from Chepstow. To provide only one train an hour to a town of the size and strategic importance of Chepstow – rail head for the Wye Valley – is poor indeed, compared with other towns in our Country and the Valley Lines. Two an hour each way should be a minimum. We recognise the need to get people out of their cars and on to public transport to help the environment. Improved rail services are a step towards this.

A submission to this effect was made prior to the granting of the new Wales and Borders franchise. This appears to have been ignored.

Background

Rail Franchising

Passenger [rail services in the UK are operated through franchise agreements](#). The provision of passenger rail services in the UK was privatised following the passage of the [Railways Act 1993](#). Passenger services were divided into a number of franchises and awarded to private Train Operating Companies (TOCs).

There are a number of franchises that include routes which serve Wales and therefore a number of TOCs with services that operate in Wales.

The [*Welsh Ministers \(Transfer of Functions\) \(Railways\) Order 2018*](#) devolved responsibility for the procurement of the next Wales and Borders franchise to the Welsh Ministers. The UK Government Secretary of State for Transport retains responsibility for other rail franchises operating in England and Wales, including the Cross Country franchise. The UK Government retains responsibility for Welsh rail infrastructure.

Chepstow Station and Services

Services which stop at Chepstow station are included in both the Wales and Borders franchise and Cross Country franchise.

According to the latest available data from [the Office of Rail and Road on 'estimates of station useage'](#), there were 251,824 entries/exits at Chepstow station in 2016–17. This is a slight increase from the 2015–16 number of 246,742.

Wales and Borders Franchise

The current Wales and Borders Franchise operated by Arriva Trains Wales comes to an end on 13 October 2018. The new franchise will begin on 14 October 2018.

In 2015, the Welsh Government established [Transport for Wales](#) (TfW) as a not-for-profit company wholly owned by the Welsh Government. TfW undertook the procurement process for the next franchise, along with [South Wales Metro rail services](#), on behalf of the Welsh Government.

The Welsh Government procured what it describes as an Operator and Development Partner (ODP). The ODP is expected to operate rail services across Wales, and also to develop plans for, and subsequently implement and operate, South Wales Metro rail services.

The Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Transport published a [written statement on 4 June 2018](#) announcing KeolisAmey as the new ODP for the new franchise.

In his statement, the Cabinet Secretary provided some information on what is included in the new franchise agreement and [TfW has made a summary of information available](#) on its website.

In relation to services to/ from Chepstow, the summary information states that the new franchise agreement includes 'a consistent 1 train per hour between Cheltenham and Cardiff by December 2022'.

The Cabinet Secretary also announced investment of £194m 'in modernising all 247 stations in Wales'. A number of stations have been identified as 'flagship schemes' for investment, including Chepstow station.

Cross Country Franchise

The current Cross Country franchise is due to end in December 2019, and in July 2018 the UK Department for Transport ([DfT](#)) [launched a consultation](#) to inform development of the franchise tender specification. This document included ‘ideas for the next franchise’. It also outlined the services provided by the current franchise for each station.

In relation to ‘typical winter weekday off-peak’ services in each direction, Chepstow is listed as having a service every two hours.

The DfT also published [pre-qualification information and expression of interest documentation](#) for potential bidders.

However, on 20 September 2018, the Secretary of State for Transport, the Rt Hon Chris Grayling MP, [launched a review to:](#)

transform Britain’s railways... the review — the most significant since privatisation — will consider ambitious recommendations for reform.

In light of this review, it was also announced that:

due to the unique geographic nature of the Cross Country franchise, which runs from Aberdeen to Penzance and cuts across multiple parts of the railway, awarding this franchise in 2019 could impact on the review’s conclusions. **It has therefore been decided that this competition will not proceed.**

Services will continue to be operated by the existing franchisee with options beyond this to be considered in due course [Emphasis added by Research Service]. The department will consider the responses to the Cross Country public consultation in the development of future options for the franchise.

Welsh Government and National Assembly Action

In 2017, the National Assembly for Wales’ [Economy, Infrastructure and Skills \(EIS\) Committee undertook an inquiry](#) into the Welsh Government’s plans for the next Wales and Borders Rail Franchise and the next stage in development of the South Wales Metro. In June 2017, the EIS Committee published its report ‘[On the right track? The Rail Franchise and South Wales Metro](#)’ (PDF, 1.39MB). The report states that during the inquiry:

stakeholders emphasised the need for...increased frequency on the Cardiff – Chepstow line.

In his statement on 4 June 2018, the Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Transport stated that in awarding the new Wales and Borders Franchise the Welsh Government also considered the EIS Committee’s report.

The 2017 EIS inquiry built on [work undertaken by the fourth Assembly’s Enterprise and Business Committee](#) on the future of the Wales and Borders Franchise. As part of the Enterprise and Business Committee’s inquiry, [evidence was submitted by the Severn Tunnel](#)

[Junction Rail Action Group](#) (PDF, 132KB) calling for the 'Chepstow line to have half-hourly calls' as part of the new franchise.

In a letter to the Chair of the Petitions Committee, the Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Transport Ken Skates outlines that:

From December 2022, there will be an increase in train frequency during the Monday to Saturday off peak period from two trains in three hours to one train per hour between Cardiff Central and Chepstow...from December 2023 there will also be an increase...on Sunday from 0.5 to one train per hour.

The Cabinet Secretary also outlines in his letter that the changes in rolling stock under the new Wales and Borders Franchise which will increase passenger capacity on trains operating during peak morning times. In relation to other franchises which operate services in Wales, including Cross Country, on 17 July 2018 the Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Transport [made a statement in Plenary on the Welsh Government's requirements for other rail franchises serving Wales and rail infrastructure investment](#). In the statement, the Cabinet Secretary said:

Following the transfer of rail franchising functions to the Welsh Government, a co-operation and collaboration agreement is now in place with the Department for Transport. This agreement sets out how the Welsh Government and UK Government will actively engage when procuring and developing the franchises that operate services across the border in a way that takes full account of both Governments' interests and accountabilities. This is an important period for those services and an opportunity to deliver improvements that meet the needs of travellers on both sides of the border. The Wales and borders rail service contract delivers important cross-border connectivity. However, these services are only a part of the picture. The Department for Transport is currently going through its own processes for awarding new contracts for the West Coast, Cross Country and Great Western franchises. I've made my expectations of these franchises clear to the Secretary of State

In relation to the Cross Country franchise, the Cabinet Secretary states in his letter to the Chair of the Petitions Committee that:

officials have asked the Department for Transport to improve services for passengers at all stations in Wales...they have stated that there must not be any reduction in station calls in Wales made along the Cardiff to Birmingham corridor and - additionally - more trains should stop at Chepstow.