

[National Assembly for Wales](#)

[Enterprise and Business Committee](#)

[Inquiry into the future of the Wales and Borders Rail](#)

Evidence from Mark Lee – WBF 42

1. I have worked at Aberystwyth University since 1974 and have used both road and rail extensively as an essential part of my job. I, together with many colleagues, have had a great deal of academic collaboration with many large and small companies and businesses throughout Wales and the UK. As it takes at least 2 hours to connect to the larger rail network, it is not unreasonable to expect regular, reliable, comfortable rail travel for long journeys, in the 21st century in a modern European country.

2. However, this is not the case. In my 39 years the train service has improved slightly in journey time but not at all in quality or frequency of service. The trains have always been at 2 hourly intervals and are very often crowded, over-heated, noisy and delayed. Unlike in North and South Wales, our rolling stock is always inferior, consisting of only 2 or 4 carriages of diesel multiple units. These have no first class facilities and are intended for local commuting use, and are unsuitable for long journeys of 3 hours or more. For example, the heating (in the winter) or air-conditioning (in the summer) is often not working, people are often forced to stand and delays causing missed connections are not unusual, as are coach replacements for sections of track.

3. I know many people who would or should use rail but always drive – this represents a significant hidden demand that is difficult to record.

4. I'm sure others will comment on the details of the problems mentioned above, so I'd like to consider the wider picture and the opportunities that are being missed in Mid Wales. If we look at the differences between the transport links for Aberystwyth and Mid Wales and those for North and South Wales, we see huge differences. The experience of travelling to Aberystwyth for visitors creates a negative image problem that hinders the full flourishing of economic, cultural and academic networking so important to modern business, growth and development. In particular, imagine the impression made on distinguished visitors and potential business partners who arrive at Birmingham International airport after a long flight to find that another three hours are involved – and if they have just missed a train this becomes five hours. I doubt if any other UK town with a significant university has a worse connection to an airport – certainly none does in Wales.

5. Now consider going the other way to catch a flight. From Aberystwyth it takes 3 hours by train (and also by car). For an international flight at least 2 hours prior to departure are necessary, however, delays are not unusual, and so it is important to catch the train before the ideally connecting one. As the trains only run at 2 hourly intervals this means you must leave Aberystwyth seven hours (2+3+2) before flight departure. If your flight is in the morning this means an overnight stay in an airport hotel is essential – thus adding another 12 hours - and making the Birmingham option no better than using a London airport.

6. I quote Birmingham International as it is our nearest airport. Manchester is almost identical in travel times, both for road and rail, and London airports are at least 3 hours further. Some typical journey times give comparisons between North, South and Mid Wales:

Bangor to Manchester Airport - 2hr 40 min
Bangor to Heathrow - 4hr 30 min

Cardiff to Birmingham International - 2hr 30 min
Cardiff to Heathrow - 2hr 40 min

Aberystwyth to Birmingham International - 3hr 17 min
Aberystwyth to Heathrow - 6 hrs. 15 min

7. Unfortunately, unlike in the South with the M4 and Intercity routes, and in the North with the A55 and Holyhead main line, Mid Wales is served with much poorer road and rail transport facilities.

8. Regarding roads, while the considerable expenditure on road improvements is really appreciated by all, even the most elaborate schemes (such as the Glandyfi widening on the A487 in the North and the A470 improvement near Builth in the South) can only remove bottlenecks and improve safety. With haulage, agricultural use and over 400,000 caravans on Welsh roads per year, we cannot expect average journey speeds to be more than 40mph. A motorway would be far too expensive, and so, to improve transport up to modern standards, only rail offers much cheaper, efficient and upgradeable possibilities.

9. Why does this matter? It matters because neglected rail links actually reduce opportunities, damage businesses and restrict regional economic development. As Edwina Hart says in her Written Statement of 10 July; “The railway provides an important means of connectivity to serve the needs of businesses, people and communities.” Clearly, the quality of that railway is related to its ability to deliver on economic growth.

10. I have perceived from many visitors that the journey is the most negative aspect of visiting the university. (Typical comment from a collaborator: “Aberystwyth is a delightful place but, oh, getting there...”) Indeed, the journey is repeatedly mentioned as a major obstacle that hinders profitable collaborations and business exploitation of much of our innovative scientific developments. Compared to the rail links in both North and South Wales ours is a “third world” provision, and I am ashamed to have to apologise so frequently to important visitors for their (often) unpleasant journey.

11. An hourly service would alleviate total journey times considerably and improve planning and congestion. This would definitely produce some transfer of traffic from road to rail and many other knock-on effects would follow, thus boosting the region in ways that are not quantified in simple cost analyses. However, the issue is bigger than small changes to services (however welcome) and it needs a better vision of how things could be transformed for the future, followed by an implementation plan.

12. Of course, planners will make economic arguments that there is no “demand” for improved services and the costs would not generate sufficient returns. I have sufficient experience that I think these arguments can be refuted. Proper regional development plans can take account of the widest benefits and implications. By consistently neglecting transport, this region has not realized its full potential and blossomed in the way so many others have through modern infrastructure. I’m sure that an excellent case can be made for the real growth and wider regional benefits that better rail transport would make. Compared with the electrification of the Swansea-Paddington line, I’m sure that a full analysis would show that, relatively, just a small allocation would bring returns that would proportionally out perform the returns expected for electrification.

13. Other arguments about mountainous terrain are belied by the impressive rail services in at least 5 different countries in the alpine regions. I note that when the Queen visits Aberystwyth she does so by train, so there is no technical reason why comfortable trains cannot run on our tracks!

14. It seems to me that after experiencing so many rejections, procrastinations and very long referrals for even minor action on such issues, this effectively amounts to a policy of regional neglect. I urge everyone concerned to consider the many and various economic benefits that a seriously modernised rail infrastructure would bring to Mid Wales. Ms Hart mentions that electrification can bring transformational change to South East Wales. I’m sure a serious study of Mid Wales rail would identify transformational economic, business and cultural benefits for the whole region.

15. It is not unreasonable to expect regular, reliable, comfortable rail travel in the 21st century in a forward-looking country.

Mark H Lee