

[National Assembly for Wales](#)  
[Enterprise and Business Committee](#)

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

Evidence from Prof Lorna Hughes – WBF 70

Dr Siân Phipps  
Clerk, Enterprise and Business Committee  
National Assembly for Wales  
Cardiff Bay, CF99 1NA

September 13<sup>th</sup> 2013

Dear Dr Phipps,

I wish to submit evidence to the current consultation on *The future of the Wales and Borders Rail Franchise*. I am a regular rail passenger on Arriva Trains Wales Services between Aberystwyth and Shrewsbury, as I have regular business in Cardiff, London and continental Europe. I moved to Aberystwyth in January 2011, and since then I have travelled on the Aberystwyth to Shrewsbury Line very regularly, so I feel I am in a position to provide evidence. My academic work requires me to undertake travel of this nature. **Based on my experience, the rail service provided by Arriva Trains Wales is not fit for purpose and must be reviewed and improved as a matter of urgency.** To address some key terms of reference from your enquiry:

**Whether the current franchise meets passenger needs and what lessons should be learnt from it**

The current franchise does not, by any definition, meet passenger needs. This is what we get:

- There is only a train between Aberystwyth and Shrewsbury (and therefore, the rest of the world) every two hours.
- There are no early services on a Sunday.
- The journey takes 3 hours and 12 minutes to get to Birmingham New Street (a distance of 124 miles). – The train is usually served by two coaches – whether or not it is a busy time of day, the school holidays, the start of the University term, or another easily predictable time of demand, leading to dangerous overcrowding (I have counted fifty people standing in one carriage on the last train of the day from Birmingham News Street)

- There is no direct train service to Cardiff. The train journey time is 4 hours 32 minutes
- While new carriages have been introduced on this line in the past year, there are still carriages with no power outlets
- Train services don't connect with bus services to overcome timetable deficiencies (e.g., getting to the airport on a Sunday morning)

I travel a lot, and I have yet to find a worse service anywhere in Europe between large population centres, especially places where there are universities, National Libraries, tourist attractions, etc.. I guarantee that any passenger that you survey is dissatisfied with the current service. Unfortunately, it's hard to find rail passengers, as so many of them have been forced to stop travelling for work, or forced to use cars, because of the appalling service.

What is important to state, though, is that this is the advertised service. It's inadequate. However, this advertised service is frequently disrupted by late-running trains. I have had to complete my journey between Shrewsbury and Aberystwyth in a bus or taxi countless times, causing massive disruption. I have several times arrived home in a taxi at 2am after disruption on the line.

So we have a totally inadequate service, which is frequently disrupted. What is the impact of this? In many cases, the infrequency of the trains means that I regularly have to stay extra nights away from home when travelling on business, or take far more expensive flights than are available because again, I have to work around the infrequent train service. As I am an academic, my travel is often funded by the European Commission, JISC, or the AHRC. I have to get authorisation to incur these additional expenses (expense that is, of course, ultimately paid by the taxpayer). I also work in the public sector in Aberystwyth, so again, I know that additional public funding is spent on travel because of the poor rail service. Spending extra money on travel, of course, means we can do less with limited project funding. I would be happy to provide an actual calculation of these additional costs over a period of a year. Multiplying these costs by the number of passengers who incur them would be an alarming waste of taxpayers' money.

The poor service also means that it is very difficult for me to persuade colleagues from elsewhere to travel to Aberystwyth for business. For example, last year, I ran a workshop at NLW with visiting academics from Ireland. At the end of the day, they went to the station to catch their train - only to discover a rail replacement bus service. As they had flights to catch,

they had to incur the expense of a taxi to Shrewsbury. It's fair to say that this sort of thing makes Aberystwyth look bad. I currently have an ESF Research Network grant, and would love to organise project events in Aberystwyth, but it is completely impossible to persuade people to travel from Eastern and Central Europe to Aberystwyth for a short academic meeting. As events like this bring revenue to the region, I feel Aberystwyth is missing out.

### **How passengers should be involved in the franchise development and delivery;**

I suspect that any involvement from passengers would be an improvement on the current situation, where there is no opportunity to provide input at all. For example, the time of the last train from Birmingham International was brought forward five minutes (more or less guaranteeing that the connection from London can't be made) with no consultation. The summer schedule cut the number of services from London to Aberystwyth at the weekend – with no consultation.

The service has no mechanism for incorporating growth, yet the service has the capacity for growth. Between 2007–11 the Welsh Government funded capital work to dual part of the line. When the work was complete, an hourly service was meant to be commissioned in anticipation of the December 2011 timetable change: despite huge demand from passengers., this has not happened.

### **How communities and local government / Regional Transport Consortia should be involved. Could they be involved in specifying the franchise or perhaps even in delivering services?**

They couldn't do any worse than Arriva. The current service is centrally managed by a company with no local consultation or accountability, and this must change.

### **The routes, particularly cross-border routes, which should be included;**

As a historian, I am always amused by the fact that it took less time to get to Cardiff from Aberystwyth by train in the nineteenth century than it does today. We desperately need an Abersywyth–Camaerthen rail link. I do not drive, so I have to take the train to Cardiff for business, so I am bitterly aware of how slow the service is.

**Whether additional lines, enhancements to existing lines, new stations or other infrastructure are needed;**

Re-opening stations like Bow Street, or developing new stations, would enable those currently commuting by car onto the train. This would mean that more people could travel to take up jobs elsewhere.

To conclude, I read with dismay the report in the "Cambrian News" on Aug 1st that we are again to be denied an hourly train service from Aberystwyth to Shrewsbury: and in fact, that Edwina Hart has actually taken us a massive step back by asking the rail interest groups to "investigate the demand for rail services". It seems that the provisions of the 2010 National Transport plan have been completely discarded. An investigation of the demand for better rail services between Aberystwyth and Shrewsbury is not a demanding task. All one has to do is ask any commuter, tourist, student or visiting businessperson standing on the platform at Aberystwyth station if they wish the area had a better train service – the answer would be a fairly unanimous 'yes'. Of course, one of the issues is that the people standing on the rail platform represent a tiny minority of people who actually have to travel – the rest are forced into cars or buses for travel between Aberystwyth and Cardiff and Shrewsbury. The impact on the local economy must be extraordinary.

I am thoroughly disheartened by the existing train service provided by Arriva. I think that the people of Wales deserve better.

Yours Sincerely,

Professor Lorna Hughes