

SARPA (Shrewsbury to Aberystwyth Rail Passengers Association) aspirations for the replacement Wales and Border franchise.

Forward - The Cambrian lines a comparison with other lines.

Official Figures from the Office of Rail and Road show that approximately 2 million journeys were recorded on the Cambrian Mainline and Cambrian Coast line in 2015/2016. The Borders line recently re-opened in Scotland is hailed as a big success for attracting just over a million journeys with a half hourly service, yet Cambrian passengers have fewer trains. In South Wales the Merthyr Tydfil branch attracts less than one million journeys a year as do the combined sum of all three lines in Pembrokeshire in South West Wales. In England lines such as Exeter to Barnstaple and the East Suffolk Line also see less than a million journeys per annum, both have hourly services and the East Suffolk is having direct trains to London restored.

The Cambrian is a stand out success story in terms of rural regional rail routes and deserves to have the confidence of its passengers and communities along its route rewarded with further investment.

Our Top aspirations for a modern line:

1. A franchise that lives in the real world.

The basic assumptions about the current franchise let in 2003 were pure fantasy: the hysterical instance of the Strategic Rail Authority that rail use was going to go into decline therefore a “no growth” franchise was appropriate was made up nonsense that bore no relation to the actual growth in usage at the time and since nor the suppressed demand for rail travel that there still is in Wales and the Borders due to the failures of successive Governments transport policy.

The replacement franchise must be first and foremost realistic and flexible to meet the challenges it will face in the real world over the decade from 2018 to 2028. Catering for actual and suppressed growth must be part of that process. SARPA would like to see the operator weaned off the current levels of Government subsidy by expanding rail usage and therefore revenue on the network.

Adherence to the poorly specified low expectation current franchise agreement combined with high subsidy from the Welsh Government has been a recipe that has resulted in deficiencies and poor practices that are culturally acceptable to the current TOC Management and Government but not users.

Interventions from Welsh Government to address some of the deficiencies and the TOC reporting to them has led to a culture of the Welsh Government being referred to as the customer to the detriment of the actual customers who use the

trains. The new franchise whilst acknowledging the public funding it will get must re focus on the passenger who are after all the people who use it in the real world.

2. A realistic quantity of rolling stock in the franchise.

The inherited quantity of rolling stock deemed fit for a no growth franchise in 2003 was inadequate for peak times even then and this key deficiency had been cruelly exposed by growth since. The new franchise desperately needs to **significantly increase** its long distance service fleet.

Our experiences, the current situation and planning for growth to 2028 suggest that the franchise needs to aim to have:

- a minimum of 6 car/coach formations in operation between Shrewsbury and Birmingham International.
- Enough rolling stock to run a full hourly service between Aberystwyth and Shrewsbury whilst fitting in with the above requirement. 2 car formations will be inadequate at peak times.
- Monday to Friday Peak Hour additional stock on the Shrewsbury to Birmingham International Corridor should be used for extra capacity on the Cambrian on Saturdays and school holiday times.
- Manchester to Cardiff services need to be 6 car/coach formations in the peaks and no fewer than 4 at other times.

We would suggest as a minimum at the start of the franchise that the entire 24 unit current ERTMS fitted Class 158 fleet is allocated solely to the ex Regional Railways Central lines in the franchise. I.e. Chester/Birmingham International/Aberystwyth/Pwllheli. A proportion of units could be reformed into 3 car sets.

3. Trains that go where there is customer demand.

- **Through Trains must be maintained to Birmingham New St & Birmingham International from the Cambrian (Aberystwyth and Pwllheli).**

There is overwhelming demand for trains to continue as through services to Birmingham either to New St for the city centre, International for the airport/ NEC or using it as one change of train for London and other UK destinations. A lack of through trains would severely effect usage/revenue.

- **Improved connections at Shrewsbury from/to Cambrian trains towards/from the North West of England i.e Chester/Crewe/Manchester.**

The current poor connections at Shrewsbury to the North West of England are suppressing demand with lengthy wait times of 40 plus minutes or tight connections that are not held for late running even by a minute or two which are off putting.

We have consistently identified the Cambrian to/from North West England flow has having high potential for growth, connections at Shrewsbury have been prioritised toward Cardiff which has remained a thin market despite over 10 years of trying to stimulate it.

We are not averse to some Cambrian services that currently terminate at Shrewsbury running through to Crewe or Manchester as a means to do this, this would also connect the Cambrian directly with HS2 in 2026.

- **Improved connections at Shrewsbury from/to Cambrian trains towards/from London with services operated by the West Coast Mainline franchise.**

Whilst details on this franchise have yet to be announced we expect an increase in services to/from Shrewsbury. Many Cambrian users are reluctant Birmingham New St interchangers the new station refurbishment was not designed with interchange passengers in mind. Many would prefer to change trains at Shrewsbury onto a London service.

4. Cambrian Mainline Full Hourly service.

After years of campaigning extra services were introduced on the Cambrian Mainline in May 2015, this was resourced without any additional trains and a timetable has been produced utilising existing resources which has led to a hotch potch timetable that shifts between an hourly and a two hourly service. Early indications of strong growth in the first eighteen months have been very welcome and have justified the introduction of the extra trains despite poor publicity and the public being confused as to when trains are running. There have been reports of passengers standing on the 0630 from Aberystwyth to Shrewsbury between Welshpool and Shrewsbury this September (2016), the train was only introduced in May 2015. The biggest complaint we hear is the need for a service from Shrewsbury around 1630.

We feel that this justifies the next step to running an hourly interval service throughout the day between Shrewsbury and Aberystwyth. The times of the trains need to be tidied up to be clockface as well with the current departure times varying each hour which is causing confusion.

5. Cambrian Coast Line - fit for purpose.

The coast line is in a tourist area bordering on the Snowdonia National Park with peaks at weekends and school holiday times year round yet the timetable/service fails to reflect that fact.

- **Proper Sunday Service all year round.**

The current service is something of a joke with a token “winter service” one train each way running on May Bank Holiday Sundays and Easter. The brief “summer” service of 3 trains each way is also inadequate. The pattern should reflect that on the mainline with services starting after 0900 at their weekday frequency.

- **The need for increased capacity at peak times.**

Already alluded to above the line sees pronounced seasonal peaks but the railway currently supplies the same two hourly interval two car service as in mid winter. Severe overcrowding, passengers not being able to get on trains, late running that impacts all the way to Birmingham and an inability to collect fares is a result. Staff at Machynlleth in desperation hire in road transport in the summer months.

- **Improved timetable and connections.**

A full hourly service on the Cambrian Mainline should improve connectivity between the Cambrian Coast and Aberystwyth allowing people proper access to their nearest regional centre.

6. Shrewsbury station - fit for purpose.

Shrewsbury has been the only gateway to the Cambrian line since the mid 1960's, however the station has suffered from neglect and stripping out capacity in years gone by has left poor passenger facilities for today's expanding market. The station needs to function properly and should be a priority as a regional hub station. The long waits facing many passengers for connections are exacerbated by the poor condition of station which discourages use further. The isolation of Platform 3 from the rest of the station hampers its use and is particularly awkward for interchange passengers.

Action Needed:

- Repair of the leaking canopy roof
- New toilets
- Improved catering/retail facilities.
- Ticket Barriers that actually work - Shrewsbury's gate line has the highest fail rate on ATW's network.
- An internal footbridge connecting Platform 3 to the island complex.

Confusingly Cambrian departures use Platforms 3,4,5 & 6 on a regular basis a dedicated platform would be easier for passengers.

7. Welshpool station -fit for purpose.

Welshpool is the busiest intermediate station on the line between Aberystwyth and Shrewsbury yet its platform facilities consist of a single bus shelter with one corner occupied by a TVM which is shunned. The station desperately needs better sheltered waiting as a matter of priority.

8. A car parking plan for all stations on the line.

There's a paucity of car parking for rail customers at all stations with feedback indicating this is putting customers off traveling by rail. A plan is needed probably in conjunction with local authorities to improve this. In addition, certain locations such as Newtown suffer from town office workers taking advantage of free car parking and crowding out genuine rail users.

9. Bus/ rail Integration needs to happen.

There are 19 closed stations on the Cambrian Mainline between Shrewsbury and Aberystwyth with further communities without rail access along the closed lines from Aberystwyth to Carmarthen, Barmouth Junction to Ruabaon, Afon Wen to Bangor, Moat Lane Junction to Brecon and Buttington Junction to Oswestry. These communities all suffer from a lack of Bus/rail integration combined with the poor parking mentioned above means they are isolated and disconnected from the rail network.

Bus services tend to be local authority specified some local authorities are more receptive to working with the railway than others - Powys CC in particular has a mental block on the issue seemingly going out of its way to make sure integration doesn't happen. The new franchisee must work to bring back the lost communities to rail.

10. Fair Fares and Attractive Fares

Whilst on the whole fares on the Cambrian (particularly so with Cambrian Railcard) and from the Cambrian to Birmingham and London are relatively good value for money there are still some anomalies' and other fares within the Wales and Border franchise area that are not.

- **Attractive fares for day trippers on Cambrian Coast which are easier for staff to issue too.**

Summer services on the coast can be busy and on-board staff struggle to issue tickets to all customers, many get a free ride- a simplified zonal flat price ticket for day trips between Aberystwyth-Machynlleth-Barmouth & Pwllheli would help issue tickets and be attractive for the tourist trade.

- **Peak pricing based on departure time in rural areas must be abolished its grossly unfair.**

We can understand peak pricing based on arrival times/departure times into/out of large cities served by the franchise as there is enormous pressure on services around them at those times however the current practice of declaring departure time in rural Mid Wales before 0930 as "peak" is grossly unfair. It's impossible to arrive into Manchester before 1215 or Cardiff before 1211 on weekday Off Peak Day Returns long after any peak hour commuter would want to. The distances involved are too great.

- **Fare Anomaly to Telford must be sorted out.**

Telford is the only destination between Birmingham International and Aberystwyth/Pwllheli that has an Off Peak Day Return fare available to it from stations in the upper Severn Valley. The fares to Telford both the Off Peak Day Return (£21.40) and the Anytime Return (£23.30) are more expensive than the Anytime Day Returns to stations beyond it like Wolverhampton (£19.60) and Birmingham New St. (£20.00). Fortunately, most people are in the habit of splitting tickets at Shrewsbury otherwise the market and revenue for this flow would collapse completely. It confuses non regular passengers no end - Telford fares should move into line with other fares on the Cambrian to Birmingham International route.

- **Fair Fares to destinations off line in the franchise.**

Fares to places like Manchester, Liverpool and Cardiff represent poor value for money in comparison with travel to London. Advance Purchase fares are not as numerous nor as cheap and the off peak returns can be 50% more expensive per mile than to London - as well as being penalised financially any traveller who changes at Shrewsbury faces poor facilities, poor connections and smaller trains as well.

- **A TOC Railcard**

There is a crying need for a national railcard available to all not just selective groups as are the current national railcards. There are many users who get no reward/discount for using the railway on regular basis such as part time workers who commute and regular business travellers. Part time workers are heavily penalised either paying full price each day they travel or having a season ticket they can't take full advantage off. Whilst on the Cambrian line the Cambrian Lines Railcard over comes this issue we recognise that it's a problem elsewhere on the network.

Such a card needs to be pitched at a level where it doesn't undercut season ticket prices but rewards people who spend a sizeable amount on the railway each year. A £60 annual purchase price giving a 33% discount at all times would do this. Users would have to spend at least £200 a year to benefit, the £60 fee would be an income stream in its own right and the discount would encourage further rail use.

11. Publicity

The beneath map shows the boundary's of the Snowdonia National Park, the Cambrian Mainline at Machynlleth touches its southern boundary and the Cambrian Coast Line is inside or along its western boundary. According to the Snowdonia National Park Authority 10 million visitors a year come to the park, around half of whom stay overnight in the park.



Does rail really play its role in accessing/helping that market? Sadly the answer has been not really under the current Wales and Border franchise. Better marketing of the line as a means to visit the National Park or take journeys within it is an obvious area to exploit.

Generally marketing of rail services has been poor often ascribed to the current operator being frightened of attracting more people than the railway can cope with, however if we were going for growth and planning to accommodate it marketing is a very important component of enabling that to happen.

12. On-board Staff- Yes Please.

There is universal opposition to DOO amongst our membership, the need for a second staff member permanently on-board in rural areas with numerous unmanned stations over a wide area is an absolute necessity. The Cambrian system is 135 miles long with just 3 manned stations west of Shrewsbury. A

single manned train would be many many miles and a lot of time from any form of help in the event of any safety related incident. Passenger Assistance would have to be abandoned and everyone would get a free ride! Going to the expense of installing DCO would be a waste of money as the trains would have to have second member on board permanently anyway for revenue, customer service, passenger assistance.

On board catering is also a necessity on the Cambrian, the retail opportunities that present themselves near urban railway stations do not exist in rural Wales. Journey time from Birmingham International to Aberystwyth is just over 3 hours and to Pwllheli over 5 hours. These are long distance journeys; currently the catering does not cover the coat line this needs to be addressed.

What we don't want - which is as important as what we do.

Crayon's on the franchise map.

Trains terminating at Shrewsbury because of childish political manoeuvring over franchise boundaries - a disaster for travellers who want direct services to the West Midlands. We are agnostic as to whether Cardiff or someone else controls and specifies the franchise providing through trains are maintained.

All trains leading to Cardiff.

Long distance service improvements should not be focussed on an hourly Cardiff to Holyhead service. The Welsh Governments aspiration for this is totally misplaced. Not only do current usage figures show this market to be thin increasing the frequency will have no impact on increasing usage because people in North Wales want to travel to destinations nearer and more relevant to their life's such as in the North West of England. These trains if introduced would depress usage, depress revenue and undermine the business case for electrification as the rail service across the North Wales Coast and Chester to Shrewsbury would become less relevant and less attractive to the people who live there. It would also crowd out improvements elsewhere.

Likewise a "flagship" Aberystwyth to Cardiff service would also be an irrelevance to users as the market is so thin. Please do not let a tiny minority from the public sector/ Nationalists ruin long distance rail services for the majority.

A fare simplification exercise used as an excuse to increase fares.

Whilst the UK rail fares system is a total mess needing genuine root and branch reform no one wants a tidying up exercise that are used for back door fare increases.