

Issue 78 Spring 2025

Rail Wales

Newsletter of Railfuture in Wales



Rail versus road? A GB Railfreight class 66 loco (66784) hauls a train of empty wagons through Colwyn Bay on its way to Llandudno Junction where it will be loaded with crush slate before returning to England. How many lorries would be added to the traffic on the adjacent A55 if this train did not operate?

Photo: [skimpler@flickr](#)

WELCOME

Another year has passed and the Welsh rail scene slowly edges forward in improving its offer, seeming to often to follow a two steps forward and one step back pattern of delivery.

On the positive side is the recent news that the cut of one through train from the Heart of Wales line timetable, introduced last December, will be reversed. This follows negotiations in the Wales Senedd between Jane Dodds, Senedd Member for mid and west Wales which includes part of the route, and the Labour controlled Welsh Government. Jane obtained this commitment as a condition for her support to pass the 2025/26 government budget (see Newlines p14).

Another item of good news is the Welsh Government decision to approve, after many years of deliberation, the new station at Cardiff Parkway, midway between Cardiff Central and Newport (see p11).

Less positive is the continuing lack of a date for the introduction of the tram trains on the Cardiff to Treherbert, Aberdare and Merthyr routes. It is now two years since the first deliveries of the new class 398 rolling stock to the new Taffs Well depot took place and it appears that the new electric service will not begin until December 2025 at the earliest.

On the performance front, TfW Rail has edged up the table of on time arrivals by train operators and has continued to attract more passengers. However, total numbers carried are still slightly below the pre-Covid peak and a big challenge remains to return numbers on the Cardiff Valley routes to former levels following the decline in commuter travel. I was interviewed on BBC Wales (view at www.youtube.com/watch?v=QxU7_i5rv3s) in October 2024 about the latest performance data and pointed out that whilst TfW Rail performance and numbers had improved, it was from a relatively low base and there was still work to be done.

There is a page on the Railfuture main website titled "[railfuture-in-the-news](#)" that lists some of the mentions that we get on the media (newspapers, TV and radio). An image from Peter's TV interview is shown on the right.



Railfuture Wales was very sad to learn of the death of a passenger in the Talerddig collision in October. Although it will be many months before the

conclusion of the accident investigation team is published, it appears that poor rail adhesion on the class 158 unit travelling westbound was the likely cause. The amount of coverage this incident received partly reflects how rare serious train accidents are and it is worth remembering that rail remains one of the safest ways to travel.

Finally, I am pleased to confirm that a new WhatsApp group has been established for Railfuture Wales members. This provides the opportunity to share news and comment in a quick and convenient way. The group has been used to update members on committee decisions and on current consultations, such as the current Regional Transport Plans reviews. If you wish to join the group, please send your mobile phone number to John Hanahoe (email mogmut@btinternet.com).

Peter Kingsbury

RAILFUTURE WALES ANNUAL MEETING 2025

SATURDAY 12 APRIL, SHREWSBURY at 14.00 hrs

Members and friends are very welcome to attend our annual get together, held once again in Shrewsbury station on a Saturday afternoon in April.

There will be a chance to review the activities of Railfuture Wales over the past 12 months, discuss any issues and make suggestions for the future direction of the organisation and its parent body, Railfuture GB. The committee for the next 12 months will be decided.

This year, we are very pleased to welcome a speaker from Network Rail to give a presentation on the current projects in Wales, and future prospects, including the closer integration of track and trains under Great British Railways.

To attend the meeting, please assemble outside the British Transport Police door on the station forecourt shortly before 14.00 hrs.

Members are requested to consider joining the Railfuture Wales committee. This provides you with the opportunity to get involved with making the case for better Welsh rail services and to meet senior TfW staff and politicians. The committee meets four times a year, with three of the meetings held on Zoom on weekdays evenings. You have the chance to take part in discussions and which (if any) other tasks you carry out between meetings is up to you.

If you wish to find out more or discuss this opportunity, please contact Richard Wilcock before the AGM (email sowerby01@yahoo.co.uk). It is not necessary to attend the AGM to join the committee if the date is not convenient for you.

CHAIR'S COLUMN

Welcome to 2025. A few of my thoughts on issues that face rail this year and into the future. Feel free to disagree. By all means use our WhatsApp members' site to air your views.

'Fix £1bn rail strikes, hospitality bosses urge' is a headline in the business pages of *The Times* on the 13th January. It refers to the present rest day working terms and conditions which are affecting services run by other operators impinging on Wales and the Borders, namely Northern, Avant West Coast, GWR and Cross Country. This is causing rail passengers a lot of pain. I am not pointing at one group but one must ask why, invest in rail if services cannot run due to lack of staff? This issue has been running for decades and has come to a head now. Is it time for politicians, civil servants, rail management and unions to get together to sort this out? I think so. It will take time to recruit the extra staff needed but a start needs to be made now.

At our last committee meeting we discussed decarbonisation of the railway. We have been offered various options: electrification, discontinuous electrification, batteries and hydrogen - as a fuel or in a fuel cell. I have no view on these but it is good to see some movement within the industry.

More electrification such as doing the whole of the South Wales valleys network, Cardiff to Swansea, North Wales Coast and the Filton Bank is needed soon. At the time of writing the UK government is very quiet on its objectives. Within the Wales and the Borders area speeding up North - South services is needed. On YouTube a recent Permanent Way Institute talk on how improving junction turnout speeds can improve end to end journeys times can be seen. It's cheaper than raising line speed. Yet government edicts only allow like for like junction replacement. Time for more creative solutions?

Lastly, the government has admitted that Wales, and I presume that includes the borders, has had under-investment in its railways. So, if Wales and the borders was given 1, 2 or more billion pounds, how would you spend it? Answers on WhatsApp or to the editor.

Richard Wilcock

THE 20 BUSIEST STATIONS IN WALES: THE RECOVERY FROM COVID CONTINUES

The latest statistics for station usage in Wales are set out in the table below. To help understand the trends since the arrival of Covid in March 2020 devastated the rail industry, the usage for the year April 2023 to March 2024 is compared with usage in the 12 months immediately before the start of the pandemic lockdowns in March 2020. Data is also provided for 2022/23 to show trends over the past 12 months.

| Station | 2019/20 | 2022/23 | 2023/24 | Change [1] |
|---------------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|
| Cardiff Central | 13,141,000 | 10,185,000 | 11,499,000 | 87.5% |
| Newport | 2,814,000 | 2,340,000 | 2,718,000 | 96.6% |
| Swansea | 2,134,000 | 1,884,000 | 2,186,000 | 102.4% |
| Cardiff Queen St | 2,784,000 | 1,714,000 | 1,826,000 | 65.6% |
| Bridgend | 1,557,000 | 1,133,000 | 1,278,000 | 82.1% |
| Cathays | 1,002,000 | 699,000 | 823,000 | 82.1% |
| Neath | 832,000 | 666,000 | 778,000 | 93.5% |
| Bangor | 652,000 | 578,000 | 697,000 | 106.9% |
| Treforest | 679,000 | 554,000 | 650,000 | 95.7% |
| Pontypridd | 841,000 | 536,000 | 596,000 | 70.9% |
| Caerphilly | 739,000 | 525,000 | 569,000 | 77.0% |
| Cardiff Bay | 1,522,000 | 511,000 | 546,000 | 35.9% |
| Wrexham General | 521,000 | 489,000 | 630,000 | 121.0% |
| Rhyl | 519,000 | 483,000 | 567,000 | 109.2% |
| Port Talbot Parkway | 561,000 | 472,000 | 539,000 | 96.1% |
| Barry | 537,000 | 452,000 | 528,000 | 98.3% |
| Barry Island | 787,000 | 368,000 | 382,000 | 48.5% |
| Penarth | 643,000 | 367,000 | 459,000 | 71.4% |
| Abergavenny | 415,000 | 360,000 | 402,000 | 96.7% |
| Cwmbran | 413,000 | 353,000 | 385,000 | 93.2% |

Source: Office of Rail and Road (ORR) published 21 November 2024.

Note [1]. The percentage change compares 2019/20 with 2023/24

Firstly, the good news: all stations saw more use in 2023/24 than the previous 12 months and several stations were busier than in 2019/20, the first time this has occurred since the Covid pandemic. However, the uneven recovery pattern that has emerged since Covid had such an impact continues. Stations on the North Wales main line plus Wrexham have recovered well. Elsewhere the South Wales main line principal stations have also seen strong usage with Swansea beating its 2019/20 usage. Similarly, the Marches route (Newport - Shrewsbury) continues to

perform well with Abergavenny and Cwmbran usage close to their previous peak. When looking at the data, it should be borne in mind that higher passenger numbers do not necessarily translate to a similar increase in revenue as more leisure traffic and less commuting will generally result in a reduction in passenger income per mile.

It is in the routes where usage is dominated by commuting that numbers, although higher than 12 months ago, are still well below their pre-Covid levels. Thus, the Cardiff core valleys stations featuring in the table are still experiencing passenger numbers at around three quarters of levels experienced in 2019. This is, no doubt, primarily due to the working from home phenomenon affecting many office workers who typically used to commute to Cardiff five days a week. The drop is most starkly shown in the figures for Cardiff Bay station, which is still below 50% of its pre-Covid peak. An exception to this is Treforest where student usage from the adjacent university dominates for most of the year, and learning from home/rented accommodation has not taken off in the way that it has for office staff.

The routes with the slowest recovery of passengers are at the core of the South Wales metro project. Although some of the benefits of the investment in new trains were starting to be felt in 2023/24, the main transformation in terms of faster more frequent journeys had yet to be felt. It is to be hoped that the significant investment in trains and track on these routes will result in passenger numbers markedly increasing to exceed the pre-Covid levels.

Footnote: There are 223 stations in Wales, and all are managed by Transport for Wales Rail.

Anyone interested in the methodology used to compile the ORR's station statistics can view <https://dataportal.orr.gov.uk/media/1904/station-usage-steer-methodology-report.pdf> for a 47-page report. Table 3-2 on page 19 shows how season ticket adjustments are made for Cardiff.

RAILFUTURE WALES ENGAGES WITH NEW MPs

Following the General Election last July, Railfuture Cymru Wales decided to contact all 13 new MPs in Wales to tell them about Railfuture and its activities, and to invite them to meet us to discuss rail-related issues of interest to them. To date, members of the committee have met with three MPs.

David Chadwick, Liberal Democrat MP for Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe

We told Mr Chadwick about some of our aims, such as a minimum two-hourly interval on all routes, a simplified fare structure and integration with buses. All these come from the Railfuture Cymru Wales *Development Plan*.

Mr Chadwick's principal interest was the Heart of Wales Line (hardly surprising as it is the only railway in his constituency) and its current problems, including unreliability and the recently imposed 20% service cut (five through trains a day reduced to four - see Newslines for recent news of the reversal of this decision).

Mr Chadwick appeared to be sympathetic to our views.

Ann Davies, Plaid Cymru MP for Caerfyrddin (Carmarthen)

Subjects covered with Ms Davies included how the industrial relations and rest day working issues of Northern, Avanti West Coast and GWR are affecting services in Wales through train cancellations. TfW Rail, although free such issues, is still having difficulties running a reliable service. None of this encourages people to use the train.

We also discussed rail upgrades and electrification of the main lines in Wales, and better connection of buses and trains in rural areas. Investment was covered: as TfW operates in Wales and the Borders, investment on the Borders line would benefit rail uses in Wales *and* England, should the Westminster government increase funding!

Becky Gittins, Labour MP for Clwyd East

A chat with newly elected MP for Clwyd East, Becky Gittins, covered similar subjects: electrification of the North Wales main line, the problems of cancellations and short formed trains, lack of flexibility to respond to demand, and the poor performance of Avanti. Additionally, we spoke about the possibility of connecting the Wrexham - Bidston line to the Merseyrail network.

We asked what we can expect from Labour on the structure of the rail network and raised the thorny issue of HS2 cancellation: whether Labour will reverse it, and in any case, how the rump of HS2 will connect to North Wales. We fear services may be cut as the West Coast main line is limited to two tracks for a stretch north of where HS2 will now join it at Handsacre, even if the North Wales main line is electrified as proposed by the Sunak government.

Finally, we spoke about Network Rail's poor vegetation management and the potentially fatal consequences: trees on the line after heavy winds and wheel slip in the autumn on wet leaves. The collision between two trains at Talerddig on 21st October 2024 occurred about two weeks before this meeting.

As these MPs are newly elected, we didn't expect answers at the meetings: but it was important to hear their concerns. We are grateful to them for taking the time to meet with us and hope they found the meetings useful. Hopefully more meetings will follow.

Julian Langston

MEMBER'S ONLINE MEETING

Another in the occasional series of Zoom meetings for Railfuture Wales members was held in mid-November 2024. A briefing was provided on the news from TfW Liaison Group held the previous day (see pagw 12). Those present were invited to raise topics for discussion. The issue of reducing the gap between the frequency of Sunday services and the rest of the week was one focus. The need to provide better connections at Newport between the Marches line services (Shrewsbury/Hereford - Cardiff) and GWR trains to and from Bristol and beyond was also raised.

Those present considered the meeting to be worthwhile even though there is now an alternative way of contacting other Wales members using the new WhatsApp group (see Welcome column page 2). Another online member's meeting may be arranged for June. This will be advertised on the WhatsApp group.





“Old and new: the changing scene on the Cardiff Valleys network. Trimode 756111 running in electric mode, forming the late-running 1322 Aberdare to Merthyr Tydfil passes 150267, the 1308 Merthyr Tydfil to Aberdare at Waun-Gron Park on Cardiff’s City line on 27th November 2024. The platform indicator for the Merthyr Tydfil train shows Cardiff Central; when the photo was taken, most trains were only advertised as running far as Cardiff Central, but they have run through to Merthyr Tydfil since June 2024. 756s are visitors to this line, to be replaced with class 398 tram-trains later in the year. Photo: Julian Langston

About the Class 756 trains (from Wikipedia)

The class 756 FLIRT is a class of tri-mode multiple units built for Transport for Wales Rail by Swiss rolling stock manufacturer Stadler Rail, built in Bussnang, Switzerland.

Capacity: 3-car: 118 seats, plus 24 tip-up & 148 standees; 4-car: 158 seats, plus 32 tip-up & 204 standees

Fleet numbers: : 756/0: 756001–756007; 756/1: 756101–756117;

FREIGHT NEWS

Starting in North and Mid Wales, the stone traffic from Penmaenmawr and slate traffic from Llandudno Junction continues, as do the timber trains from Aberystwyth to Chirk Kronospan works.

In the South, the Robeston (Milford Haven) oil flows to Westerleigh (Bristol) and Theale (Berks) run several times a week, though not as frequently as a few years ago. Trostre (Llanelli) receives normally two open coil loads of steel a day from Port Talbot, but the scrap trains from Trostre to Port Talbot ceased when the final blast furnace closed down in autumn 2024. There are a couple of covered steel trains a week to Newport Docks, presumably for export, although I am not sure whether the service to Tilbury still operates.

A recent blow to rail freight in South Wales has been the apparent ending of timber traffic from Baglan to Chirk just before Christmas. There was one odd working in January to clear a train already loaded in December, but nothing since. A contact of mine tells me there will be no further workings, but nothing official has been announced.

Despite the closure of the last blast furnace, steel traffic from Port Talbot to Round Oak (Dudley) and Dee Marsh (Shotton) continues several times a week in covered wagons. Open coils are also sent to Llanwern, sometimes several trains daily, and other destinations too. Since the blast furnaces closed imported steel coils for processing at Port Talbot are being unloaded at Cardiff Tidal Sidings a few times daily and these trains proceed to Newport Alexandra Dock Junction where the loco runs round before heading west to Port Talbot. Imported slab for the Port Talbot works reaches the UK through both Newport and Portbury (Bristol), and travels west on the South Wales main line. Celsa at Cardiff also generates several trains a week of steel. This means Cardiff Central sees more steel trains passing than for a good while!

The Barry Docks Freightliner flow continues four days a week, Monday to Thursdays. The Tesco Daventry to Wentloog trains operate twice daily, and there are Freightliner workings from Wentloog to Southampton and London Gateway. Finally, the Machen branch sees normally one, but sometimes two aggregate trains most days of the week, including Saturdays.

Rhodri Evans

NEWSLINES

Cardiff Parkway

Photo (right) from Cardiff Parkway Developments used on BBC news article on 3 January 2025 when the station was approved.



A sigh of relief was heard across South East Wales in late January when the Welsh Government First Minister, Eluned Morgan, announced that she had decided to approve the outline planning application for the new business park and rail station on the eastern edge of Cardiff close to St Mellons. The project is strongly supported by Cardiff Council and has been under assessment by the Welsh Government for several years.

The new station, known as Cardiff Parkway, is to have four platforms: two on the 'fast' lines currently used by most passenger services, and two on the 'slow' lines, traditionally used by freight. The 'Parkway' name indicates that the station will be built with alongside a large car park which aims to attract passengers from a wide area of eastern Cardiff. This part of the city, although close to the South Wales main line, currently has no stations nearby. This contrasts with the rest of Cardiff which is served by the various local services radiating out from Cardiff Central.

The business park will potentially include offices, industry and warehousing. The intention is that the station would be largely funded by the developer of the business park, paid for by the income from that initiative. The station would make travel to the adjoining employment area by train an option to provide a sustainable means for journeys to work in a location which is difficult to serve by bus.

The concept of a new business park and train station in this location originally emerged over ten years ago. The world of work has changed significantly since then with the advent of 'working from home' for many people in office jobs. It is hoped that this will not 'derail' the scheme as a result of the forecast profits from the business park possibly being reduced.

The station would form one of six new stations being proposed on the South Wales main line between Cardiff Central and Severn Tunnel Junction. The other stations emerged from a study into improving public transport in SE Wales following the decision to abandon the M4 relief road around Newport (carried out by the Burns Commission).

TfW News

The following headlines emerged from the TfW Liaison group held in November 2024:

- Customer information at stations: Seven new mobile digital display totems will be introduced at various stations in 2025 and new help points will be installed at stops on the Heart of Wales, Cambrian and west of Carmarthen routes. At request stops on the Heart of Wales line, a new 'request to stop' facility will be installed whereby train crews are notified electronically if there is someone waiting to board. The days of waving a hand in the air are no more.
- Accessibility: Shotton is the next station in line to receive a new lift and footbridge to connect the two platforms on the North Wales main line.
- Wrexham-Bidston: the class 230 trains will be operating all services on this route from spring 2025.
- Heart of Wales: spring 2025 should see four Active Travel trains operating. These are class 153 units adapted to carry more bikes with the aim of attracting more leisure users in an area popular for off road cycling.
- 2026 remains the target date for increasing train frequencies on the North Wales main line. This year is determined by the need to remove a level crossing at Prestatyn.
- The 'Local Rail' trial project of Transport for Wales and Network Rail working more closely, continues on the Cambrian and Heart of Wales routes, and is now proposed to be introduced on the North Wales main line.

Community Rail Initiatives

The Spring 2024 issue of Rail Wales included a feature on the five Welsh Community Rail Partnerships. Two recently launched initiatives have caught the editor's eye:

- The 'Conwy Valley guide' provided by the Conwy Valley and North Wales Coast Partnership. An app called Window Seater has been developed to provide passengers between Llandudno and Blaenau

Ffestiniog with a commentary on the passing views from the train window. The app connects passengers with the world outside the train, bringing them geolocated, bilingual audio stories recounted by local people.

- The South West Wales Connected Partnership has organised a 'Joy of the Journey' project. It has focused on making rail travel a more inclusive, enjoyable and sustainable experience for community groups across the region who have not traditionally used rail. The project hosts up to three train journeys a month spanning routes from Neath and Port Talbot to Pembrokeshire via Swansea and Carmarthen.

Funded by Transport for Wales and Great Western Railway, 'Joy of the Journey' exemplifies how rail travel can be accessible, convenient and a powerful way to bring communities together. The project's impact is already evident, with community groups such as the National Autistic Society, transgender support group Sadie's Butterflies, and the veterans' charity VC Gallery embracing the opportunity for memorable days out. Each journey is thoughtfully designed to meet the unique needs of its participants, showcasing rail travel as a mode of connection, empowerment, and fun. The project has made the shortlist for the annual National Community Rail Awards.

GWR News

Railfuture Wales attended the GWR Wales Forum in late February. It was announced that the late May timetable change would see little in the way of amendments to the operator's services in South Wales.

The Forum was told that the company was recruiting train staff to allow it to operate more Sunday services without being dependent on voluntary overtime. In the meantime, negotiations continue regarding the rosters of existing staff. One aim is to provide more 'resilience' on Sundays during the busier summer months when more people are travelling and therefore the impact of 'last minute' cancellations is greater.

A Network Rail representative attended the Forum and confirmed that in addition to the ongoing study of how to raise speeds on the relief lines between Cardiff and the Severn Tunnel, separate work was underway looking at capacity in the tunnel itself and the possible electrification of the Filton bank (lines from Patchway / Bristol Parkway to Bristol Temple Meads).

Although taking place in west London, the trials currently underway of the fast-charging battery train on the West Ealing to Greenford branch could be of significance to Wales where there are many routes on which the cost of overhead wires would not be justified financially.

Heart of Wales service cut reversed

As this issue was being completed came the welcome news that the reduction of the Monday to Saturday service of five through trains on this route to four from December 2024, had been reversed. The further revised service will not start until December 2025 at the earliest. Local sources say that the reliability of the service on the route has recently improved with trains crossing at Llandrindod Wells, the larger town, rather than Llanwrtyd Wells. It is hoped that this improvement continues when the timetable is revised once more.

New campaign for a Caerleon station

A new group, to campaign for the provision of a station at Caerleon, located between Newport and Cwmbran, has been formed. It is called Towards Restoring A Caerleon Station (TRACS). The town was identified in the Burns report on alternatives to the M4 relief road as the site of a possible station. It is hoped that TRACS will become a member of Railfuture, joining the nearby Magor station campaign group who are current supporters of Railfuture.

POSTSCRIPT

There is just sufficient space to finish this issue with a mention of what is arguably the most important current topic facing the railways of Wales: how Wales fits into Great British Railways (GBR). This new organisation is being created to better coordinate the management of track and train. At present in Wales, with the exception of the Cardiff Valley routes, track falls within the remit of Network Rail, accountable to the DfT in London, whilst most trains are the responsibility of Welsh Government.

How will the strategic decisions, such as funding, be made once GBR is up and running? One suggestion is that a GBR Cymru be established, i.e. a subdivision of GBR, with a Wales only remit. This would be given a set proportion of the funding GBR receives and would then decide how it is spent on the Wales system in liaison with the Welsh Government. Watch this space!



Swansea station slumbers in the quiet of the late evening in this image taken in October 2024 which shows the two types of rolling stock (a TfW Rail class 197 and GWR class 800 IET) providing longer distance services in South Wales. In 2023-24 Swansea was the first station in S Wales to exceed its pre-Covid passenger numbers. Photo: Jessika Venn

Thanks are extended to all who contributed to this issue. In all cases, any opinions expressed are those of the contributors, and do not necessarily represent *Railfuture* policy. Material for the next issue – articles, letters, photos or comments – should be sent to the editor, Peter Kingsbury at peter.kingsbury@railfuturewales.org.uk or by post to 22 Winchester Avenue, Penylan, Cardiff CF23 9BT, by 31 August 2025 for the autumn 2025 issue. The editor may edit letters for publication.

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The beauty of North Wales: a Transport for Wales class 197 at the top end of the Lledr Valley on a Llandudno to Blaenau Ffestiniog service, framed by the slopes of Moel Siabod mountain.

Photo : [skimpler@flickr](#)

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