

Issue 81 Autumn 2026

Rail Wales

Newsletter of Railfuture in Wales



A new class 398 tram train passes Radyr Weir on the River Taff during its journey from Pontypridd to Cardiff Bay on a recent service run- see article on page 4.

Photo: Julian Langston

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WELCOME

As we pass through the second half of 2026, I realise that it is ten years since the Welsh Government started to make plans for the award of the new franchise for Welsh railways. It had recently been given powers by Westminster to decide the franchise (many years after similar powers were devolved to Scotland) and launched a bidding process.

Four submissions were received to replace Arriva Trains Wales. Railfuture Wales met all four bidders and explained its vision for how Welsh rail could evolve to allow it to play a larger role in meeting the country's transport needs. The winning bidder was French/Canadian based Keolis who partnered with Amey engineering. The latter were to deliver the required upgrade/electrification of the Cardiff valley routes. The bidders were required to demonstrate how they would provide a comprehensive improvement across the Welsh network with new rolling stock and more frequent services on many routes. A new arm's length body was created by Welsh Government to manage the procurement process: Transport for Wales.

Keolis started to operate services in late 2018 but handed back the contract to the government in the spring of 2020 as a result of the Covid lockdowns. Passenger traffic had been decimated. The only option was for the Welsh Government to take over responsibly for providing passenger services. It set up Transport for Wales Rail to carry out this role.

Covid-19 not only reversed the trend for growing passenger numbers dating back to the beginning of the 21st century, it also provided a justification for a delay to delivering many of the improvements promised in the franchise award.

The franchise award gave 2024 as the date by which all the service improvements would be delivered. Two years on from that date many of the changes have come about, e.g. a Llandudno- Liverpool through service which started in May 26. However, some are still awaited with a promised delivery date (e.g. Shrewsbury-Aberystwyth to be hourly throughout the day from 2027). A few commitments, such as a two hourly Cardiff to Liverpool service via Wrexham, have been abandoned.

More generally, passenger numbers have now recovered to or even surpassed their previous peak levels in the pre-Covid year of 2019. This welcome trend has been seen across Wales and the rest of Great Britain. Whilst welcome, I am aware that in part it reflects the trend for people to travel more by all modes, so the share of the travel market captured by rail has not grown as much as the actual numbers. For rail to have a long-lasting environmental impact it needs to increase its share of the travel market. This remains an outstanding challenge.

Turning to the here and now, since the last issue of Rail Wales was published, there has been a change in Welsh government, the first since it was established in 1999. In the past few weeks, we have started to get a flavour of its transport policies. The big announcement has been regarding the approach towards two areas of Wales where road traffic congestion has been greatest – the M4 corridor at Newport and the Menai Strait crossings.

In the case of Newport, the government has commissioned another study into the options for easing the delays on the motorway resulting from its width reducing to two lanes to pass through the Brynglas Tunnels. The study will look at options for road building/management as well as public transport improvements including additional services and stations on the Severn Tunnel Junction to Cardiff main line.

In North Wales, the government has committed to reopening an appraisal into the options for a third road bridge over the Menai Straits. It appears to no longer be asking whether a new bridge is required but how it should be built. This is a return to the approach which the previous Labour controlled Welsh Government abandoned in 2021. The last government announced it hoped that public transport links to and from Anglesey/Mon would be improved to encourage more people to use rail and bus to travel to and from the island. The recent decision need not result in an end to campaigning for better rail access to Anglesey as there is likely to be a hidden demand remaining for alternative and greener ways to reach the island.

Finally, readers will have read in the October 2026 edition of Railwatch that John Rogers passed away in May 2026. John contributed a huge amount to rail campaigning in Wales and the work of Railfuture. He will perhaps be especially remembered for his inspiration and hard work to ensure the closure threat to the Cambrian Coast railway line was defeated in the early 1980s. He served as chair of Railfuture Wales for many years and when I joined the committee and made me feel very welcome. He will be greatly missed.

Peter Kingsbury

CHAIR'S COLUMN

Since I last wrote I have been in contact with my members of the Senedd to complain about the poor Sunday services on the North Wales coast. Basically, the service relies on Avanti West Coast (AWC) running five-coach trains to carry the travelling public and the combined AWC and TfW Rail service is roughly once an hour in the middle of the day. The issue here is why hourly as the rest of the week we can have two or three trains an hour? As we all know Sunday is a day much like any other, but the rail industry still runs services as if we were in the 1950s. My understanding is that TfW Rail has an agreement with the unions that makes Sunday working part of the working week. Secondly, if Avanti West Coast cancels a service, the contents of a five-coach train are decanted on to a two-coach train which TfW Rail seems to run on Sundays. Seven coach loads of people do not fit into two coaches. I believe that we need a Sunday service akin to the rest of the week, perhaps with a later start. I suspect cost is the main reason, but isn't TfW Rail's purpose to serve the people of Wales? If you have an opinion of this, please use our members WhatsApp (Railfuture Wales/Cymru Members).

I notice on Trustpilot TfW Rail has a rating of 4 stars which given my experience of travelling with them seems very high. Looking in detail, it seems to me that the travelling public are happy with the ticket purchase rather than the service. TfW Rail does seem to spend a lot of time replying to every comment posted. In spite of my

criticism of TfW Rail it is far from the worst operator. Again, I would like members' opinions as this can be fed back at the regular liaison meetings.

The rumour mill suggests TfW Rail may be acquiring new rolling stock. If this is true, then the mistakes of the past must not be repeated, and rail users should be involved from the outset in specifying the trains.

On a different note, this year I have travelled on trains in Lithuania, Poland, Switzerland and Italy. Zurich Hauptbahnhof is a wonder to behold as it is on three levels served by it seems double decked trains many of eight-carriage length. It makes the UK look like a toy train set. Polish trains were cheap and comfortable whilst Lithuania had a Soviet feel at low frequencies. In Italy my train from Tirano to Milan managed to be 15 minutes late in the first hour but arrived only a few minutes late. I cannot remember a recent British rail experience of that happening.

Richard Wilcock

TRAM TRAINS: FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Railfuture Wales committee member Adam Woodcraft gives his thoughts on the new tram-trains which have started to operate in the Cardiff Valleys

The long-awaited introduction of Transport for Wales class 398 tram-trains into passenger service took place on 23rd June. TfW opted for a "soft launch" with no advance publicity, but the word had got around. When I boarded it at Queen Street after its first run from Pontypridd to Cardiff Bay the train was already well occupied by an assortment of enthusiasts as well as a large number of TfW staff. Indeed, on the run back to Pontypridd those along for the ride seemed to rather outnumber the regular passengers, and there was something of a party atmosphere.

The overall view from both staff and non-staff alike was very positive and indeed I was impressed myself with the train. Inside it felt much more like a train than a tram, with conventional seating complete with tray tables and even two bays of four seats around tables behind each cab, although sadly unlike the Sheffield tram-trains there's no forward view. The main giveaways that these aren't regular trains are the straps to hang from and the lack of luggage racks.

The windows are enormous with slim pillars between them so these trains should be excellent for viewing the countryside in the Valleys once they make it beyond Pontypridd, and the trains are provided with a supply of at-seat power sockets and Wi-Fi.

Acceleration is brisk and the door gap fillers spring out somewhat more enthusiastically than on the TfW FLIRTs (class 231 and 756) which should help with dwell times. Even more usefully, the doors were under driver control which saved considerable time compared to guard operation.

There are some downsides – the ride was somewhat lively, the Welsh on the passenger information system needs improvement and the lack of toilets has already

had considerable discussion. TfW bravely had their first day of operation on an abnormally hot day and the air conditioning was struggling, though matters seem to have improved since then.

I've had quite a few opportunities to ride on 398s since the first day and my view remains that these trains are suitable for the services they are intended for, and almost all the passengers (and staff) I have talked to have been positive about them. I'd certainly be happy to have these for my commute and (aside perhaps from the lack of a toilet). I don't think that that most passengers will see them as offering a significantly worse experience than the FLIRTs they will largely replace.

Since that first day, operations have increased from a single train running in the morning only to three trains running the entire day and covering all the Pontypridd to the Bay runs. They have yet to operate in multiple in passenger service as will no doubt be required at busy times, but test runs have been taking place.

As with any introduction of a new fleet there have been several failures and unfortunately as I write this the fleet is out of action. TfW states this is due to software issues being resolved. I hope that this will be short lived and soon we will be seeing 398s on services north of Pontypridd and ultimately offering the promised four trains per hour to the head of each valley.

Adam Woodcraft

RAILFUTURE WALES IN ACTION

Railfuture Wales has been busy over the summer months with a range of activities.

Publicising Railfuture

Committee member Jessika Venn has taken the initiative to create a new display stand to use at public events to promote the work of Railfuture Wales and attract new members. The stand has visited model rail shows at Prestatyn, Shrewsbury (jointly with Railfuture W Midlands), Penarth, Machynlleth, Chester (jointly with Railfuture NW England), Swansea and Cardiff. Over a dozen visitors have joined, and the Railfuture name is now familiar to hundreds more people.

A photo of the stand can be seen on page 6.

Engaging with Senedd Wales/Cymru

In addition to arranging for the Railfuture Wales stall to travel around the country, Jessika Venn found time to attend the Senedd in September as the organisation had been invited to provide an input to the Energy, Economy and Connectivity Committee's discussion about its work programme over the next year. Jessika reports the following from the event:

"I discussed the Railfuture Wales priorities before the Senedd visit with other committee members and the following were agreed to form the core of our input:

- the need to stress fixing reliability and dependability of current rail services as an urgent immediate need
- an explanation of how current timetables, ticketing, and non-integration of bus and rail, act as layers of friction and barriers to public transport use and mobility; and the need to move to a single integrated clockface timetable and single integrated electronic ticketing system
- the stark energy efficiency, pollution, and total cost benefits that rail freight has over road freight
- the railways massively benefit the economy, and more use of rail will reap rewards as the costs are lower than road expansion
- on the subject of rolling out overhead electrification, we should be aware that not fixing speed limiting alignment/track issues either before or as part of the electrification works, can result in locking in low top speeds, or require more expensive remediation works in the future.”

Railfuture Wales has subsequently been invited to join the Senedd’s All Party Public Transport committee.



Railfuture Wales committee member Mike Watson hands a copy of Rail Wales to a visitor to the Railfuture stand at the Swansea model rail show.

Photo: Peter Kingsbury

In early 2027 it is planned for Railfuture Wales to take part in one of the Senedd's Y Farchnad events. Y Farchnad (which means 'the Marketplace' in English) is a regular engagement event held at the Senedd in Cardiff Bay. Held on designated Wednesdays, it gives organisations an opportunity to host a stand in the heart of the Welsh Parliament and engage face-to-face with Members of the Senedd (MSs) and other participating organisations. Railfuture would be one of a dozen or so organisations exhibiting on the day.

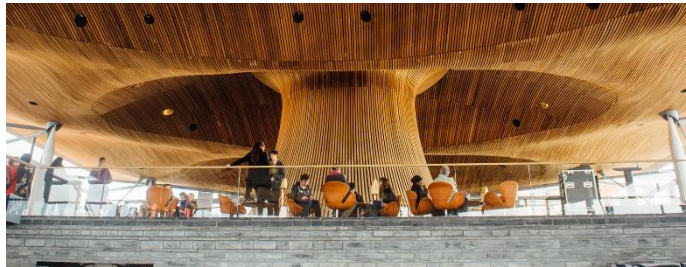


Photo of the building from the Y Farchnad page of the Senedd website.

FREIGHT NEWS

To begin in North Wales, the aggregate flows from Penmaenmawr continue several times a week hauled by Class 60s, whilst the slate waste traffic from Llandudno Junction also operates on a regular basis. The timber trains from the Cambrian lines loaded at Aberystwyth continue, using Class 97s.

Sadly, the Robeston (Milford Haven) oil trains have recently reduced to operate only on Mondays and Thursdays, although the length of the trains has grown. I believe there is one a week to Theale and one to Westerleigh (Bristol).

The Trostre (Llanelli) covered steel trains, using former Ferrywagons, operate to either Newport Docks or Tilbury once or twice a week, whilst Trostre receives daily open coil traffic imported via Cardiff Docks, with the trains running to Newport Alexandra Dock Junction to reverse. Port Talbot steelworks also receives imported slabs via Newport Docks two or three times a day, and there is a once-a-day slab working from Portbury Docks in Avonmouth, operated by GBRf.

There is an open coil train each morning from Margam to Llanwern. Finally, on the topic of ferrous metal news, the former CELSA plant at Cardiff generates several trains a week to various destinations, including Sunderland.

Inter modal: The Daventry to Wentloog Tesco trains run twice a day, and there are two Freightliner container trains from Wentloog, one to Southampton and the other to Felixstowe/ London Gateway. Finally, Machen quarry is busy with two or three stone trains daily, except Sundays, to destinations in England.

Rhodri Evans

STOP PRESS

It was announced in mid-October that the Robeston oil terminal will be closing in December 2026. If this happens a significant source of freight which uses the Swansea district line will be lost.

NEWSLINES

Global Centre for Rail Excellence in doubt

BBC news reported in September 2026 that the new Welsh Government was reviewing the future of the rail testing facility planned for a large site near Coelbren in the upper Neath valley. The land was formerly an open cast coal mine. A significant sum of money (c £70m) has been invested by the previous Welsh and UK Governments but the hoped-for private funds to allow the project to take off have not been secured.

It is stated that one option being considered is to allow a data centre and hotel to be built on part of the land to provide the cash to help raise the funds required to complete the rail testing infrastructure. The centre was intended to provide two seven-kilometre-long circular tracks for the testing of new locomotives, rolling stock and tracks/wires etc. Former Railfuture director Jerry Alderson visited the Team Wales stand in the UK Railway Industry Association Pavilion at InnoTrans 2026 in Berlin in September 2026 and chatted to the representatives about the GCRE. He reports that they were upbeat, as you would expect, and they mentioned some of their clients; for example, Furrer+Frei has tested two major railway electrification innovations. However, this does not bring in the level of revenue needed for the GCRE's major capital projects.

Cardiff Parkway

Another project under review as a result of the change in Welsh Government in May is the proposed new station at Cardiff Parkway. News reports suggest that the new government is reviewing the commitment of its predecessor to help fund the Parkway business park development, including a new four platform station at this location, approximately midway between Newport and Cardiff Central. However, following the recent announcements of a further study into options for addressing road traffic congestion in the Newport-Cardiff corridor (see page 3), it is likely that any final decision on the funding of Cardiff Parkway will await the outcome of this study in 2028.

Wales bids farewell to private train companies

The next six months will see the two remaining English train companies (TOCs) with significant operations in Wales taken under wings of Great British Railways. Great Western will no longer be privately owned after the 13th December and Avanti West Coast goes the same way on the 7th March 2027. That just leaves CrossCountry as the private operator with interests in Wales. This large TOC, which just ventures into Wales with its services from Cardiff Central to Birmingham/Nottingham, is due to be nationalised by the end of 2027. The date this will occur has not been announced.

Work starts on Wales first modern tram line

Construction work has begun on the tram route from the south side of Cardiff Central station to the Cardiff Bay branch. This section of tram line is about one kilometre long and runs on street before joining the elevated Cardiff Bay branch about 800 metres north of Cardiff Bay station.

Whilst the work is underway, the surface car park outside Cardiff Central has been closed and drivers dropping off and meeting passengers are advised to use the ground floor of the new TfW new multi-storey car park on Penarth Road about a five-minute walk from the station. The new tram link will provide a convenient rail-based connection for travellers arriving at Cardiff Central from England and West Wales whose destination is Cardiff Bay. It will also form the core of the proposed Cardiff Crossrail scheme linking the west and east of the city via Cardiff Bay.

The new service is the only currently approved tram route to be developed as part of the South Wales metro project to enhance public transport across the South Wales valleys and Cardiff. The implementation of the project was linked to the 2018 franchise award when tram trains were ordered to operate more generally on new tram lines. The attraction of this was the lower cost of providing new tram routes compared to traditional train infrastructure as a way of increasing the reach of rail. Although there are a number of ideas for new tram routes to connect with the existing rail lines, none is close to approval and funding.

Swansea-Bristol Temple Meads service: the wait goes on

As this issue of Rail Wales was being prepared there was still no news as to the decision of the Office for Rail and Road (ORR) on the application from TfW Rail to run a two-hourly service from West Wales (Milford Haven/Carmarthen) to Bristol Temple Meads. This service is an improvement that Railfuture Wales has long campaigned for as it would enable journeys to Bristol city centre, and on to Bristol Airport, to be made without a change at Cardiff or Newport. Existing Milford to Cardiff trains would be extended to Bristol.

However, for reasons that are not entirely clear given its imminent demise, GWR has objected to the proposal, citing loss of revenue and possible congestion on the route east of Severn Tunnel Junction. TfW Rail had hoped that the new service could begin with the December timetable change, but this now seems unlikely.

Swansea metro consultation underway

Transport for Wales is conducting a public consultation on the first stages of the proposed 'metro' covering Swansea and SW Wales for six weeks from 2nd November. Railfuture Wales will be responding.

It is understood that a two phase roll out will be tabled for comment. Phase 1 will focus on the line from Swansea to Pembrey & Burry Port, with additional services and a new station at Cockett replacing one closed in the 1960s. Phase 2 will focus on introducing a service on the Swansea District Line. This is currently a freight only route connecting Llanelli/Llangennech with Briton Ferry, where any new service would need to reverse to reach Swansea and Neath.

Cathays station receives new footbridge

Work commenced in October to replace the footbridge at Cathays station in Cardiff. The existing bridge has steep steps on either side which are difficult for people with

impaired mobility to use. The bridge is the only connection between the station's two platforms unless an 800-metre diversion. The new bridge will provide ramped access and lifts.

The existing station design and bridge dates from 1983 when the then new Cathays station was the first major improvement in local rail services delivered after decades of decline. In those pre devolution days, the project was led and funded by the former South Glamorgan County Council. Cathays station has gone on to prove a resounding success, partly as a result of its location close to Cardiff University and large number of offices in the surrounding area. In 2024/25 it was the sixth busiest station in Wales with nearly one million users.



Railfuture Wales members are captured alongside an impressive bank of levers in the Severn Bridge Junction signal box at Shrewsbury. The visit was kindly arranged by Network Rail and took place prior to the AGM in April 2026. This box controls the many semaphore signals in the Shrewsbury station area and is claimed to be the largest operational semaphore box still operating in the world. The contrast with ETCS signalling on the line to Aberystwyth, which starts in Shrewsbury, could not be more marked. Photo courtesy of Network Rail

POSTSCRIPT

There are risks that in campaigning focussing on the rail system's hardware such as track, stations, rolling stock and timetables, Railfuture misses encouraging rail use by people who are constrained by other factors. The opportunities to attract greater use of rail by addressing the 'softer' issues which can prevent people travelling by train can easily be forgotten by regular travellers and campaigners.

One project which seeks to tackle such constraints is 'Travelling with Confidence'. This is managed by the SW Wales Connected Community Rail Partnership, which covers Swansea, Neath, Port Talbot, Carmarthenshire and Pembrokeshire. The project engages with young people, and adults with special needs, with the aim of building skills and confidence to travel by train. Sessions are arranged to plan a fictional journey looking at possible day trip destinations in South Wales. A Travelling with Confidence rail safety presentation is shown at the sessions which cover the following topics:

- how to buy tickets and understanding cost
- how to access the railway station
- understating timetables,
- booking Passenger Assist.

Project manager Phil Merchant reports that it was really encouraging to give the young people choices about what travel is possible and hear them voice their aims, challenges and thoughts about train travel.

Travelling with Confidence is a Community Rail Network programme, grant funded by the Motability Foundation.

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 28 February 2027 for the spring 2027 issue. The editor may edit letters for publication.

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Two new tram trains cross at Cathays station in August 2026 during their trial period. The photo was taken from the footbridge which is being replaced (see page 9). At this location the trains will be operating using battery power as the overhead wires end two kms distance away between here and Llandaff.

Photo: Peter Kingsbury

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