
North Wales Needs Improved Rail Services and HS2 Connectivity

A Policy Forum meeting for Wales was held on 24th January at Wrexham and concentrated on the actions needed to deliver a Growth Deal for North Wales. The regional economy has recently received a double blow with news that the proposed new nuclear power station located at Wylfa (Ynys Môn-Anglesey), which is served by a rail terminal at Valley is not to proceed, and the threat that Airbus UK production at the Broughton plant in Flintshire might be discontinued as a result of a Brexit re-alignment.

It is common ground among stakeholders that a pre-requisite to create the conditions necessary for economic growth in the region is to improve the poor quality of the coastal rail service. First Class Partnerships has been working with train service providers for some time to identify how aspirations can be delivered in the immediate future and to define the longer term connectivity opportunities offered by the arrival of HS2 at Crewe in 2027

FCP identified at an early stage that electrification of the 105-mile route from Crewe to Holyhead and Llandudno with spurs to enable electric trains to run from the coastal towns to employment centres in North West England could not take place with the poor level of fare box revenue at the stations concerned.

Network Rail has assessed the project at current traffic levels and has suggested that the benefit: cost ratio is as little as 0:2; an un-investible proposition that reflects the lack of past ambition to provide greater capacity and reduced journey time. There is currently no proposal for the region to benefit from improved connectivity from the arrival of HS2 at Crewe.



No passengers on offer at key Llandudno Junction rail hub

The plan which has been presented by FCP to the Department for Transport as part of the Market-Led Proposals initiative, Transport for Wales, HS2, and the Cheshire West and Chester, and Cheshire East Councils is a two-tier approach. It recognises that before electrification can be justified, the rail service product must undergo radical improvement to bring a significant increase in passengers as has been seen by the Trans Pennine Express franchise and the independent Hull Trains Company.

This North Wales Express service would be separated from the current operation of stopping services in a similar approach to the past split between Trans Pennine Express and Northern franchise operations.

The increase in fare box revenue that will result from a well-designed timetable that allows travel to work and public services in Chester and other centres in North West England, combined with a market led approach to electrification that is likely to sharply reduce the suggested £1 billion cost, can be expected to produce a benefit: cost ratio that will justify the project.

One of the reasons why the services on the North Wales coastal route is a poor revenue performer, is that there remains a mind-set that the purpose of the journey will mostly be for leisure travel to the long-established holiday resorts that are served. With the decline of local tourism from its heyday, the strategic importance of the railway is now to enable travel to employment centres that offer higher value jobs, and also for public services in those locations.



Local Authorities in North Wales record low GVA outcomes

The need for this is illustrated by the Gross Value Added statistic¹ for the area's Local Authorities. This is a figure derived from overall earnings relative to the resident population. For the relatively affluent Cheshire West and Cheshire Council the figure is £26,851 but along the coast much lower figures are recorded such as Denbighshire £16,482, Conwy £15,568, Gwynedd £18,855 and Ynys Môn (Anglesey) £13,411.

The inevitable consequence is considerable economic and social deprivation in the areas concerned which is fully acknowledged by Local Authorities.

¹GVA data from Office for National Statistics 2017

There is a lot of work to do, but there are quick wins available one of which is to provide a station to serve the Airbus factory where 6,500 are employed and which will hopefully remain once the Brexit dust has settled. At present people are making long road journeys on congested roads because there is no alternative public transport. As well as the need for express operations, a metro service centred on Chester has been muted which Transport for Wales

considers to lack ambition.

It was very evident how few of 100 or so people who attended the event in Wrexham, where the Borough has a population of 135,000, came by train. That is until you look at the timetable, which shows how much work is required to improve rail connectivity in the region.

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