

National Rail for Wales

Railfuture Wales is calling on the Welsh Assembly Government to take over the rail network.

It says WAG should set up a company to operate track and trains.

RFW says the existing system, where one company provides infrastructure and others the trains, is a ludicrous waste of money.

As a first step, RFW's three branches called on WAG to persuade the Westminster Government to grant it full responsibility for the Welsh rail network.

It should then acquire ownership of the network and set up a new company – Rail Wales – to run top-class passenger services and all infrastructure work such as track and signalling.

It was the cornerstone of a new rail plan launched at the RFW AGM in Cardiff in April.

South Wales branch chairman John Rogers said: "The rail franchise process is expensive, inconsistent and laborious. These are not my words but those of the UK's Commission for Integrated Transport."

A copy of the plan is being sent to every Assembly Member.

Mr Rogers said railways in Britain are increasingly bedevilled by financial crises, confused management and a lack of clear political direction.

He added: "The recent failure of the company running east coast services between London and Scotland is further evidence of this."

"The time has come to put our house in order here in Wales by setting up a national rail company, owned by the nation through the Assembly, and run with adequate finance and clear direction. It will give us the opportunity to re-shape Welsh rail services to reflect Welsh needs."

Mr Rogers concluded: "Our blueprint has a built-in system of consultation and liaison linking

the rail company and passenger groups and other grass-root organisations."

The Department for Transport spends £24 million a year on consultants just to oversee the franchising process.

"And then millions of pounds of profit are handed over to shareholders of all the private companies – money that could and should be retained by the industry for investment," said Mr Rogers.

He condemned what he called the crazy belief that breaking up British Rail into competing rail companies would raise standards.

"This was nonsense," he said. "There already was competition then and there is now."

"It is between modes of transport – rail competes with the car, the plane and the private haulage companies."

RFW believes its ideas do not conflict with European Union transport laws which demand separate financial accounting for train operations and infrastructure.

In Ireland, one government-owned company is responsible for train operation and engineering work.

Cross-border passenger services could be run jointly and rail freight companies would be welcome to use the network.

RFW's aim is to have better quality trains, less overcrowding, cheaper fares in Wales, better time-tabling and less delay in implementing key improvement schemes such as reopening closed stations or lines.

Mr Rogers said: "At the moment, London and the south-east of England swallow up huge amounts of finance for rail improvement and any scheme in Wales takes years to persuade Network Rail and the other involved companies to bring it to fruition – for example, reopening Llanharan station and the still-awaited bus-train interchange at Bridgend."

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December 2009: Mike and Lesley

Kneen, Hans Hammerschmidt, Roger Webster, Ralph Coulson, Roger White and Graham David Smith.

January 2010: Keith R Bullard, John Ward, Phillip J Watson, Brenda Sampson, Colin Rayner and Edward Potter.

February: Janice Uphill, Nigel Perkins, Alexander W Sinclair Macfie, Ian Sesnan, David Peters and Michael Humphrey.

March: David Miller, Roger Blake, Michael Groll, Ian Stuart and Jane Appleyard, David Allard and Alan and Maura Williams.

April: David P Riley, David T Townsend, Garth Smith, Cedric Martindale, Lindon Stone and R H Gibson.

LOCAL ACTION

Severnside

By Nigel Bray

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The branch is supporting a campaign by Councillor Andrew Turpin of South Somerset District Council to reopen Chard Junction station. Now that there is an hourly service between Waterloo and Exeter, the station would almost certainly be more successful than at the time of its closure in 1966 when it had only one direct London train each way and no trains at all on winter Sundays. People from Chard would have a shorter distance to drive to catch a train than they have currently to Axminster, Crewkerne or Taunton, very relevant in the context of rising oil prices.



The branch AGM in Gloucester in April heard that Gloucestershire ranked as the ninth worst local authority in England for children's respiratory problems and that average travel speeds in the central Severn vale area (Gloucester and Cheltenham) were under 10 mph in the morning peak and 15 mph at other times. These were among the statistics quoted by a panel of three guest speakers promoting the ultra light rail scheme being developed by Cheltenham Chamber of Commerce and Gloucestershire University.

Michael Ratcliffe, chief executive of the chamber, described how the project had evolved from a discussion with the Gloucestershire Warwickshire Railway about how to establish a rail connection from its present southern terminus at Cheltenham racecourse to the main line station.

Willy Ford of Travelwatch West Midlands said he had developed the idea into a proposed network linking Cheltenham with Gloucester via Gloucestershire Airport with extensions to Quedgeley and Stratford-upon-Avon.

Frank Chambers, professor of physical geography at the university, reminded the meeting that the smallest conurbation in Britain with a modern tram system was Nottingham and that schemes for Bristol, Leeds and South Hampshire had been axed in recent years on grounds of cost. Smaller centres such as Cheltenham and Gloucester, with a combined population of under 250,000, stood no chance of getting light rail unless the cost of construction could be drastically reduced.

The guest speakers considered catenary-fed trams to be too expensive for medium-sized cities. The relatively heavy axle loadings of conventional trams required expensive diversion of underground utilities where street running was involved.

By contrast, ultra light rail vehicles, carrying up to 50 passengers, would be powered by hydrogen, produced from anaerobic digestion of household waste. Even if Gloucestershire met its target of recycling or composting 60% of waste by 2020, it was still expected to send 150,000 tons to landfill each year.

Whereas incineration would release harmful dioxins into the air, an anaerobic digestion plant was capable of producing fuel which the authority could sell. Finance for the light rail scheme might be available from the European Union inter-regional fund, which allows organisations to demonstrate technologies applicable in other member states.

Professor Chambers noted that the three local MPs supported ultra light rail and had met with the then Transport Secretary Lord Adonis to put the case for the scheme.

The Stratford extension would involve light rail vehicles running over the preserved GWR when it was not operating its own services. Asked whether this would permit diversion of main line trains, the panel thought not. Mr Ford said he had suggested to Network Rail the rebuilding of Evesham-Ashchurch as a future diversionary route.