

CARNO STATION ACTION GROUP

BACKGROUND TO 2017 PETITION TO NATIONAL ASSEMBLY FOR WALES

The 2017 petition

We, the undersigned, welcome the development of a Business Case for the re-opening of Carno station, following Carno Station Action Group's petition to the Assembly 10 years ago. We note that the revised Business Case demonstrates a ratio of benefits to costs of 1.65 and that the stopping of most trains at Carno is compatible with the existing enhanced timetable. Carno is a relatively remote community on the longest stretch of railway without an intermediate station in the whole of Wales and a station here would open up dramatically improved, sustainable access to jobs and services. We therefore call on the Welsh Government to commit to the re-opening of Carno station within 5 years.

The outcome of the first petition – call for a business case

Carno Station Action Group submitted its first petition for station re-opening 10 years ago. It was well received by the Petitions Committee of the National Assembly, who referred it to the Enterprise and Learning Committee for detailed consideration. They held a hearing in Carno at which all the major stakeholders gave evidence and, based on what they heard, they recommended the development of a formal business case and asked "that the Minister's officials provide support to the Carno Station Action Group in developing and submitting a formal business case for such a station".

The Minister replied that it was for the Regional Transport Consortium, TraCC, to develop the business case, and at the subsequent Scrutiny of the Minister, the WG Head of Rail said "we told TraCC that it should lead the process" of developing the business case.

There was initially *no progress* in delivering the business case because WG failed to provide TraCC with the necessary funding. Frustrated at this, a delegation travelled from Carno to the Assembly in June 2009 to meet with members of the Enterprise and Learning Committee, other AMs and WG officers. This resulted in a WG commitment to fund a Stage 2 WelTAG appraisal of Carno station, which would include the necessary business case.

The Business Case

TraCC commissioned Capita Symonds to carry out the WelTAG appraisal, which was completed in May 2011. It concluded that the Benefit Cost Ratio would be between 0.46 and 1.15, depending on the number of through passengers lost because of the increased journey time.

Carno Station Action Group were dissatisfied with the Capita Symonds' business case because

- the range of Benefit Cost Ratios was unhelpfully large
- the assumed station operating costs were unrealistically high
- the capital cost included a large component for the unnecessary raising of the station car park.

The group raised these issues with Edwina Hart and as a result she arranged for the group to work with the WG Transport Economist to agree the revisions that needed to be made to the Capita Symonds' business case, particularly regarding the number of through passengers lost. These revisions resulted in an agreed Benefit Cost Ratio of 1.65.

2015 National Transport Plan

Despite the Welsh Government's track record of opening on average one new station per year, the group was shocked to discover that the 2015 NTP envisaged no new stations to be opened in the period 2015 – 2020, meaning that the considerable effort expended on developing a business case was to no avail.

WG prioritisation of new station proposals

In May 2017, Ken Skates announced the results of Stage 1 of a new prioritisation process for new stations in which a dozen stations – not including Carno - were selected for more detailed appraisal. This new prioritisation process completely cuts across the established practice whereby projects which have gained wide public and political support go through the WelTAG appraisal process, enabling government to make an informed decision on whether to proceed or not. Carno station has a WelTAG, but is no nearer go-ahead than 10 years ago.

The Stage 1 prioritisation process selected four out of five candidate stations in North Wales to go forward to Stage 2 appraisal, but only one out of four in Mid Wales (Bow Street). However, now that DfT funding has been granted for Bow Street there is no need for it to receive any further appraisal. Accordingly, after pressure from Carno Station Action Group and cross party lobbying from a number of AMs, Ken Skates has now decided that Carno should go forward to Stage 2 in its place, albeit some five months after the original stage 1 list was announced.

Discontinuation of Welsh Government Funding for new stations

The Welsh Government has achieved commendable successes in expanding access to the rail network, both through the re-opening of closed lines and through opening new stations on existing lines, with 12 new stations opening between 2005 and 2015 – more than one per year on average.

However in 2015 there was a step change in Welsh Government policy, with the 2015 draft National Transport Plan (NTP) emphasising that responsibility for rail infrastructure in Wales was non-devolved and making it clear that, following the funding of the new Ebbw Vale parkway station, WG funding of new railway stations would cease.

The WG "New Rail Stations Prioritisation – Stage 1 Assessment Report" states that "From time to time the UK Government makes funding available for new stations through specific funding calls." Up until now there have been two £20 million tranches of Department of Transport New Stations Fund in 2013 and 2016, each of which has funded five new stations.

Current prospects for the re-opening of Carno station in the next five years

As things stand, the chances of *any* new station being opened in Wales in the next five years is virtually nil because Wales has benefitted disproportionately from the New Stations Fund so far, winning one of the five new stations in England and Wales in each tranche (Pye Corner and Bow Street respectively), despite only having 5% of the population. In addition, there is no certainty that another tranche of the New Stations Fund will be forthcoming.

Access to the rail network

Travel by rail has been growing rapidly in recent years as evidenced by surveys carried out by the Shrewsbury Aberystwyth Railway Liaison Committee since an enhanced hourly timetable was introduced in early 2016. This benefits everybody, as it helps reduce CO2 emissions, road congestion, road accidents and severance of communities. However, in some areas the scope for modal shift to rail is limited, as the lack of a nearby railway station prevents people from accessing the rail network. In order to remedy this, it is essential that the Welsh Government continues to devote the same proportion of its transport expenditure to opening new railway stations as did up until 2015.

Sustainability

The Welsh Government has a legal duty to promote sustainability and its previous achievements in funding the opening of 12 stations in 10 years was fully consistent with this legal duty. The Welsh Government's discontinuation of funding for new stations is at odds with its sustainability objectives.

Funding

Our 2007 petition for the re-opening of Carno station was well received by the National Assembly. As a result, the business case recommended by the Enterprise and Learning Committee was eventually delivered and demonstrated a good case for re-opening the station. Nevertheless, we seem no nearer to a Welsh Government decision to proceed with the station than in 2007.

After a ten year wait, an expectation that Carno station will re-open within five years – as called for by our 2017 petition - is entirely reasonable. But if decisions about re-opening stations in Wales are left to the lottery of the New Stations Fund administered by the Department of Transport in Westminster, there is very little chance that Carno station, or any other station in Wales, will be re-opened in the next five years. The Welsh Government therefore needs to take back control and allocate its own budget for new stations as it did prior to 2015.

THE CASE FOR RE-OPENING

The case for re-opening has been set out in detail in many documents, including the WeITAG appraisal. However, the following is a very brief summary:

The principal benefit of the station would be to transform the accessibility of jobs in centres such as Aberystwyth, Shrewsbury, Telford and beyond. This is seen as of crucial importance to the vitality of the community since the closure of the Laura Ashley factory.

Other important benefits are that the station would

- promote sustainable travel and reduce car use
- provide a step-change in mobility for non car-owners, thereby promoting social inclusion
- enable the nascent Green Tourism industry in Carno to take off
- be an essential component of the proposed Laura Ashley Centre and Exhibition in Carno
- facilitate the development of Carno Community Centre as an All-Wales conference centre, close to the geographic centre of Wales

It goes without saying that the re-opening of Carno Station would fit perfectly with the Welsh Government's duty to promote sustainable development, as it would take Carno a major step along the road to becoming a sustainable community.