

Introduction

In rural Mid-Wales, from Shrewsbury to Aberystwyth and Aberystwyth to Carmarthen, the easiest way to travel from town to town is by car or bus. This is due to the lack of train lines throughout this area. Although there are links that move passengers toward England, Aberystwyth-Shrewsbury-Birmingham line, for those who are traveling within Wales, travel is in most cases inefficient and in some cases, not possible, without a car. **Travel Mid-Wales is a lobby group that promotes refurbishment and building of rail links throughout Mid-Wales in the hope that**

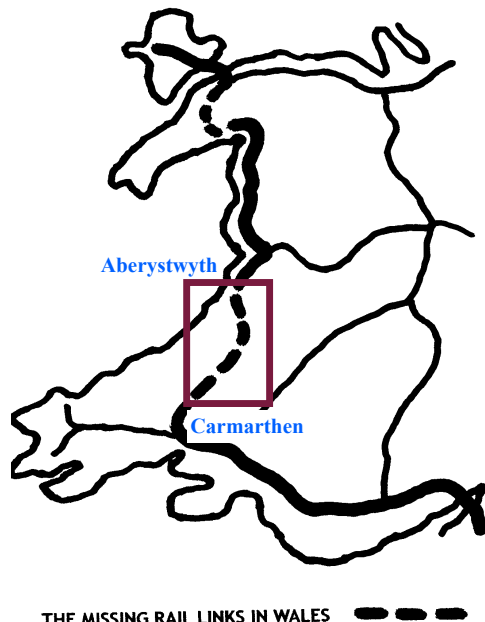


Figure 1 (Traws Link Cymru)

eventually we can create a Corridor from North-South along the West Wales coast. In order to bring Wales into the 21st century it needs to have the same levels of connectivity between cities as England and Scotland. Although there are many important potential rail links this policy report will specifically focus on the refurbishment of the Aberystwyth-Carmarthen rail link, see Figure 1. As this line only closed in 1973, and a majority of the line is still in excellent shape, it could be re-opened (Thomas 2014).

This report will outline the major benefits and the difficulties of re-opening this line to be presented to the Welsh Government for consideration. First it will detail a summary of the necessity of this line, next evidence of the benefits of rail, benefits to the community, benefits to the economy, and benefits to tourism throughout mid-Wales, and finally monetary and logistical obstacles presented by this project.

Why is this needed?

The Rail link was initially closed due to falling passenger numbers, damage to some of the tracks via flooding, and due to road improvements, which allowed freight to be taken along roads rather than rail (Railnews 2015). However, **the opinion on trains and public transport has shifted some in the last few decades, and the growing importance of Carmarthen and Aberystwyth as economic and cultural centres for Mid-Wales has many people calling for the re-opening of the lines as a necessity to boost the region, which is one of the most economically disadvantaged in Europe** (Thomas 2014).

The current National Transport Plan published by the Welsh Government (2010) recognises the need to improve North-South lines in Wales but does not indicate support for the refurbishment of this line. The plan focuses largely on the Aberystwyth-Shrewsbury line as a hub between Mid-Wales and East Wales (Welsh Assembly Government 2010). **While the Aberystwyth-Shrewsbury line is important, more people live between Aberystwyth and Carmarthen than do Aberystwyth and Shrewsbury, 55,000 people and 50,000 people respectively which means it would provide services to even more people than the current line** (Thomas 2014). The difference between these populations isn't much, however, the Aberystwyth-Carmarthen line would provide a more direct route to Pembrokeshire, Swansea, and Cardiff, where much of the population of Wales lives. It is the right of people in Wales to be able to travel within their nation as people in England and Scotland are able to do. Furthermore, the Welsh Government wants to attract people to Wales and stop the brain drain of well educated students and skilled workers from leaving Wales. **This link promotes non-car centred forms of public transportation, and allows people to live at home and commute to cities within Wales, creating greater opportunities for young people to stay in Wales.**

There has been a recent upsurge in refurbishing rail links throughout the UK. In Scotland, the link between Edinburgh and Tweedbank and in Ireland, the connection between Limerick to

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Galway has boosted intra nation travel and accessibility to people in rural areas. Rural Mid-Wales should not be left out of this trend (Traws Link Cymru).

Currently to get to Cardiff from Mid-Wales, multiple busses or a combination of trains and busses are necessary. Figure 2 above shows the how much time would be saved to get from city to city in Wales with the introduction of this line.

	Car	Bus	Train Current	Train Possible
Aberystwyth to Carmarthen	1.5 hours (Google Maps)	2.25 hours (1 transfer) (Google Maps)	No link	1.5 hours (Traws Link Cymru)
Aberystwyth to Cardiff	2.75 hours (Google Maps)	4.5 hours (2 transfers) (Google Maps)	4.25 hours (1 transfer) (Google Maps)	3 hours (Traws Link Cymru)
Lampeter to Cardiff	2 hours (Google Maps)	3 hours (1 hour bus then transfer to train for 2 hours) (Google Maps)	(See bus, not possible to do full journey via train)	2.25 hours (Traws Link Cymru)

Figure 2

Research

Roads vs. Rail

Across the United Kingdom, more people are choosing to travel by rail rather than busses when available (Department for Transport 2014). However, cars still rank highest for preferred travel (Department for Transport 2014). That being said, restoring railways is cheaper than boosting roads (Traws Link Cymru). Figure 3 indicates that this project would be cheaper than other road building projects, it would also be considerably cheaper than the currently proposed High Speed 3 rail line from London to Manchester. As this rail link is largely in tact between Aberystwyth and Carmarthen, it is more monetarily and environmentally sustainable than creating a brand new road or brand new rail line especially considering the three tunnels along the line are still structurally strong (Traws Link Cymru).

	Miles	Cost	£/mile
Aberystwyth to Carmarthen	57 miles (Traws Link Cymru)	~650 million (Traws Link Cymru)	11 million/mile
HS3	124 miles (HS2 2015)	£19 billion (Department for Transport 2013)	95 million/mile
Head of the Valleys Road (A645)	5 miles (Welsh Government)	£115 million (Welsh Government)	£23 million/mile (Welsh Government)
Port Talbot Link Road (A4241)	3 miles (CBRD 2011)	£107 million (CBRD 2011)	£35 million per mile

Figure 3

Roads are important infrastructure, especially in rural communities. However, other rail link infrastructure projects have indicated that this type of rail project would be well utilised. Figure 4

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shows, passenger numbers from the Laurencekirk line and the Stirling-Alloa line in Scotland show almost double the passengers originally projected, this is also true for the Cardiff Ebbw Vale line (Campaign for Borders Rail).

	Passengers Projected	Passengers Actual
Stirling-Alloa	155,000 passengers/year (Campaign for Borders Rail 2015)	400,000 passengers/year (Campaign for Borders Rail 2015)
Laurencekirk station	36,000 passengers/year (Campaign for Borders Rail 2015)	60,000 passengers/year (Campaign for Borders Rail 2015)
Cardiff-Ebbw Vale	400,000 passengers/year (Campaign for Borders Rail 2015)	1 million passengers (Campaign for Borders Rail 2015)

Figure 4

Community Benefits

By far the largest benefits of refurbishing this line would be in community benefits. Re-opening this line would allow for freer travel for young and older people, for economically disadvantaged people. It allows for better access to services, which are not available in rural communities such as hospitals, jobs, and schools. Creating more accessible public transportation throughout rural mid-Wales connects people and communities to educational opportunities.

There are not many hospitals in mid-Wales Carmarthen has the only large general hospital in mid-Wales (Wales NHS 2014). **Nearly 20% of people have to travel more than 15 minutes to get to the hospital and there are often road closures, which can increase travel time** (Welsh Institute for Health and Social Care 2014). Currently individuals are able to take busses from their communities to these hospitals, however they may not be direct routes and they might take considerable amount of time. **One study indicates that a woman living in the north of Ceredigion would have had to travel 125 miles per week for two cancer treatments, which she was unable to do** (Welsh Institute for Health and Social Care 2014). With the addition of a rail link between Aberystwyth and Carmarthen individuals all along this corridor will have quicker, more easily accessible access to General hospitals in Carmarthen, this is especially true for older people who may have to travel to hospitals frequently for tests and families visiting sick relatives.

Creating the Aberystwyth-Carmarthen line has the potential to create a commuter corridor between the two towns. It creates a much easier and more efficient route for individuals in rural communities to get jobs in the larger towns. Creating sustainable jobs is an important initiative the Welsh Government is attempting to accomplish, through this rail link individuals will be able to live outside the city, creating more vibrant rural communities, but also work outside the city, boosting rural villages and towns (Welsh Government). In this scenario, many individuals and communities in towns surrounding this line will benefit, creating and overall more economically viable area. **Train links in the north of England, a similarly disadvantaged region to Mid-Wales, generate close to £300 million per year for their communities** (PTEG 2014).

The last benefit to communities is in terms of education. Many smaller communities, such as the Tregaron, the sixth form and colleges close due to a lack of students to attend (Cambrian News 2013). This severely disadvantages young people in rural mid-Wales. Although the Welsh Government will pay for their transportation to the nearest town with a college or sixth form with a program they want to attend. This can be time consuming and stressful for students who have to travel long distances (Welsh Government 2014). **With the addition of a rail link, this commute will become easier and it will promote more students to want to participate in higher education.**

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Tourism

Tourism is up in Wales from the rest of the UK. Tourism is an important sector in the Welsh economy, it creates jobs and it boosts the economy through money spent by tourists (Tourism Advisory Board 2013). **Wales has much to offer travellers in terms of culture and ecotourism, overall it contributes about 4.4% to the GVA.** Tourism also boosts employment and it has been the largest growing sector in Wales since 2005 (Tourism Advisory Board 2013). **Ceredigion gains a population of about 2.7 million tourists each year** (Welsh Institute for Health and Social Care 2014).

The Aberystwyth to Carmarthen rail link would open up a new area to tourists. While currently tourists may visit Pembrokeshire, Cardiff, or North Wales, Aberystwyth is far off the trail and may get left out of visits despite all it has to offer. By re-opening the rail link to Aberystwyth, tourists from Cardiff can more easily access the Welsh heartland and tourists from Pembrokeshire can more easily travel up through Carmarthen and visit the mid-Wales coast. This will further boost this important industry in Wales.

Obstacles

Money

An economic feasibility study would need to be conducted before the full plans and decisions can be determined about this project. Finding the money to sponsor this project presents complications. In spite of transportation being devolved, the money allocated to Wales is determined by Westminster, making a large scale project like this difficult without the political will. Wales needs infrastructure investment all over the nation and this type of project may not rank high on the list of expenditures. According to Simon Thomas, AM (2014), **Wales only has 3% of the Network Rail's infrastructure budget, if it had 5%, there would be £135 million extra per year** (Tomas 2014). Next, if the transport expenses from the Barnett Formula are adjusted to account for the HS2 spending, **Wales should receive an additional £1.9 billion, which would more than pay for this project** (Thomas 2014). Further funds could be found from the EU and the European Investment Bank (BBC News 2014). As Wales does not have full power over its financial system, and due to the austerity measures by the current government, it is difficult to see that money coming for this project.

Tracks being built over

Some of the hold up around this project is that parts of the rail line have been built over. In particular the line in Lampeter now has a supermarket on it, this is a significant piece of the track and routing around it could add extra costs to the original figure (Traws Link Cymru). While Traws Link Cymru, a West Wales Rail Campaign organisation, insists that **only 3% of the track has been built over**, further studies will need to be undertaken to determine how extensive and expensive it would be to re-route these sections (Traws Link Cymru).

Cars vs. Trains

Today about 64% of travel, is done through cars rather than forms of public transportation (Department for Transport 2014). This is partially why so much money has been put into the road infrastructure in Wales and not into rail links and public transport. From Figure 1, we can see that for just two projects £200 million was invested, for very small mileage projects. This more than anything sets the precedent from the Welsh Government about which projects are important. However, the world is changing and more people are looking toward sustainable forms of travel, which emit less carbon. This is obvious from the Westminster proposal to establish the HS2 from London to Birmingham.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

This policy report outlines the significance to economic and community prosperity in Mid-Wales by re-opening the Aberystwyth to Carmarthen line. **There are many aspects of life that could be improved with the refurbishment of the rail link including access to essential health**

and job services, connections between communities and cities, allowing residents from Mid-Wales to access the greater population areas in Aberystwyth, Carmarthen, Swansea, and Cardiff. It supports greater access to tourism in Mid-Wales, which presents a significant economic benefit to this disadvantaged region. Furthermore, this significant link could save millions of pounds from the transport budget because it is more economically effective to refurbish rail links than continue to build new roads.

That being said, there remain obstacles to gaining full political support for this project. The project is expensive and as private cars are the most utilised methods of travel, it is possible that the limited funds will be put into boosting roads rather than rail links. The Welsh Government is more focused on the Aberystwyth to Shrewsbury link than opening new lines in Mid-Wales. Travel Mid-Wales believes this is an oversight because the Welsh Government should be focused on allowing intra-Wales travel and putting investment into areas that are more disadvantaged. Finally in order to fully implement this project, a full feasibility study will need to be published, which details the full costs and economic benefits to the project.

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