

Welsh Government show commitment to Wales and Borders staff

Following positive and constructive discussions, begun by Wales TUC, the commitments mean Wales, its passengers and its rail staff can move ahead with confidence as the Welsh Government's ambitious plans for the future Wales & Borders Rail Service gathers pace.

As a result of those discussions the First Minister has made the following commitments:

- As a result of significantly increased service pattern, in response to demand growth experienced in Wales, the expectation is there will be more staff not less employed on the franchise. There are rapid changes in railway technology which can improve service and efficiency but the Welsh Government recognise that passengers value personal service and want this technology to complement staff and not replace them.
- The Welsh Government wishes to improve safety, security, service and also accessibility for passengers who require assistance. The Welsh Government therefore commit to keep a safety critical conductor (guard) on all of the Wales & Borders trains and services including heavy rail Metro services and the trains will require this second person to operate. This commitment builds on a clear public response in our consultations, where over 90% of respondents said that a second member of staff was either quite important or essential in the Wales and Borders region, something Age Cymru said was 'essential'. Disability Wales estimates that disabled people make up more than 20% of the population in Wales.
- Heavy rail infrastructure for the Wales & Borders franchise outside of core valleys will remain with Network Rail.
- The exception to this will be the Core Valley lines where responsibility would transfer to the Welsh Government through Transport for Wales (TFW) subject to an agreed evaluation of the assets between Network Rail and the Welsh Government.
- Therefore the railway infrastructure will remain in public ownership and effected employees will also remain in the public sector with Network Rail or TFW. In the event of any transfer to TFW pensions will be protected and there will be no changes to conditions without the agreement of the trade unions.
- Any new Rolling stock will be maintained by skilled railway people with the maximum number of staff employed in Wales.
- The Welsh Government recognise the unions desire to maximise job security and conditions of employment of catering and cleaning staff and TFW will enter into constructive dialogue with the unions to explore how these can be met.

- The Welsh Government also commit to work constructively with the unions around unions aspirations for ticket office and station staff.
- There will be a no compulsory redundancy guarantee throughout the franchise and in respect of direct sub-contractors.
- There will be continued trade union recognition and the government will also work to ensure this also applies through the sub-contractor supply chain.
- There will be trade union representation on the Transport for Wales Board.
- If future legislation allows the Welsh Governments preference is for the heavy rail ownership and operation of the Wales & Borders services to be part of a UK national integrated railway under public ownership with responsibility and powers for passenger services and infrastructure to be sustainably and comprehensively devolved to the Welsh Government.

These commitments will underpin further detailed discussions between the trade unions and Transport For Wales officials.

The First Minister said

“Our hard working railway staff are a major asset in delivering a modern and safe railway and it is right that they are central to our ambitious plans for the new Wales & Border Services and South Wales Metro.

“I am therefore delighted that we have been able to have such positive and constructive discussions with the railway trade unions, something I have been keen to ensure from the offset.

“These are progressive commitments that will mean a better service for passengers and a better railway in Wales and I look forward to this positive dialogue continuing as we develop our plans.”

Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Infrastructure Ken Skates added:

“I’m delighted that we have been able to make progress in issuing the tender and also that we have been able to make these commitments to passengers, rail unions and their members.

“We want to hold up the Welsh rail network as an example of where a government can work in effective social partnership with trade unions to deliver a world class railway for commuters, our economy and our communities.”

Yesterday, Abellio Rail Cymru, Arriva Rail Wales, KeolisAmey and MTR Corporation (Cymru) Ltd were invited by Welsh Government to submit final tenders for the next Wales and Borders Rail Service, which will come into

force in October 2018.

Promoting Welsh business in Qatar ahead of daily flights from Cardiff to Doha

The visit comes ahead of the launch of daily direct flights between Cardiff Airport and Doha next May and is aimed at helping businesses capitalise on the trading and export opportunities presented by the new long-haul route.

Featuring a diverse selection of Welsh companies including Teddington Engineered Solutions in Llanelli, the British Rototherm Company in Port Talbot and food producer Rachel's Dairy in Aberystwyth, the visit will travel first to Qatar, and then to Kuwait, in an effort to help companies forge new trading relationships with businesses operating in the Middle East and ultimately increase Welsh exports.

Speaking ahead of the export market visit, Economy Secretary Ken Skates said:

"This Welsh Government led trade mission to Qatar and Kuwait is well timed coming ahead of the introduction of daily and direct flights between Cardiff Airport and Doha that will transform Wales's relationship with the Middle East.

"The new route will provide huge opportunities and as a Welsh Government we want to do all we can to ensure that these opportunities are capitalised on and turned into tangible economic benefits for Welsh companies.

"Exporting really does have the potential to transform a business and take it to the next level and as the UK prepares to leave the EU, increasing the value of Welsh exports to other markets across the world is more important than ever.

"While Qatar is a relatively small country, it is one of the richest in the world with a growing population, and a profile that will only be heightened over the coming years.

"Kuwait meanwhile, as the fifth richest country in the world, is another important market, and I am keen for Welsh companies to develop their trade links with both countries ahead of the introduction of the new flights from Cardiff."

One of the companies, AmniTec manufactures composite, fluoropolymer, and metallic industrial hose assemblies at its base in Merthyr Tydfil and supplies oil and gas, chemical processing, power generation, refrigeration, and other industrial markets.

Jeff Sims, business development manager for Amnitec said:

“The Middle East is an interesting market for us. We don’t currently have a distribution network for our products there and there is the potential indirect route to the oil, gas and liquefied natural gas (LNG) end users that interests us. We are currently manufacturing LNG composites and very high temperature pressure hoses at our base in Wales. We want to promote awareness of our Wales-made products and are keen to find out if there are markets for these products in these countries. We also want to find business partnerships and distributors to stock our bulk hose & promote our high engineered bespoke hose products.”

Final tenders invited as Wales nears decision on next rail service

The new rail service will deliver a step-change in the quality of rail travel in Wales. Since January 2017, officials and bidders have been discussing a range of innovative solutions to find those which best meet the needs of people in Wales and the border regions.

Rather than follow the traditional model for procuring a rail service, with the issue of a set specification that companies bid for, this approach has allowed new ideas to be explored and collaborative working relationships to be developed – setting the tone for the new service.

Proposals for the South Wales Metro are being developed alongside the Wales and Borders service to aid development of an integrated transport system in the region. The deadline to submit final tender is 21 December.

Economy Secretary, Ken Skates said:

“I’m delighted to confirm that Abellio Rail Cymru, Arriva Rail Wales, KeolisAmey and MTR Corporation (Cymru) Ltd have all been invited to submit final tenders for the next Wales and Borders Rail Service. From rolling stock to frequency of services, Metros to profit thresholds, this final tender will provide the blueprint for what these four giants of the rail industry are bidding to provide Wales.

“Detailed discussions with all four of the shortlisted potential operators have only served to reinforce our optimism that the next service will see big improvements. I look forward to seeing how the detailed tenders tackle our ambitious requirements for the next 15 years before making a decision on the successful operator in early 2018.

“We intend to create a rail service that benefits the whole of Wales, communities along the border and in England. One with passengers at it’s heart and today’s announcement is another important step towards that.”

In inviting final tender for the franchise, the Economy Secretary provided an update on progress with UK Government on fair funding. He said:

“There is will on both sides to ensure that the settlement works for Wales and the Border and, following positive talks, a resolution is near. It’s great news for rail users across Wales that this ensures the services modern Wales expects and have been promised, will be fully delivered.”

Council tax debt report shows need for change says Cabinet Secretary

The report, commissioned by the Welsh Government, brings together existing evidence, provides an insight into how local authorities currently manage the collection of arrears and explores the key issues from the local authority

perspective.

In a statement today, the Cabinet Secretary said:

“Making council tax fairer is an essential part of our plans to reform local government in Wales.

“Although this is just one strand of research which brings out the perspective of local authorities, the report helps to build our understanding of current practices in respect of council tax collection and recovery methods used across Wales.

“I will be considering the report’s findings in full before considering what changes need to be made to ensure local authority practices are consistent, reasonable and proportionate in all cases.

“I want to work closely with local government to see how we can adopt more proactive approaches, focusing on people’s individual circumstances to help prevent debt occurring and escalating.

“We know many of these households are struggling to cope with the effects of the UK Government’s welfare reforms and I remain committed to ensuring action is taken to mitigate the consequences for those affected.”

Nursing workforce is the lifeblood of the NHS in Wales – Vaughan Gething

Speaking at the All Wales Nurse Staffing Conference, Vaughan Gething thanked nurses across Wales for their hard work and commitment to the NHS and stressed the importance of ensuring Wales has a nursing workforce fit to meet the needs of patients both now and in the future.

During the speech, the Health Secretary spoke about the importance of having the right numbers of nurses with the right skills and knowledge. He spoke about the importance of the Nurse Staffing Levels (Wales) Act and announced in readiness for commencement of the Act in April 2018, the Welsh Government will be publishing the required Statutory Guidance in the next six weeks.

Vaughan Gething said:

“Wales is the first country in Europe to legislate on nurse staffing levels. We took the lead, empowering nurses and ensuring

the resources are in place to care sensitively for patients. I'm delighted the guidance, developed with and for the nursing workforce, will be published in the coming weeks."

Speaking on the one per cent pay cap on public sector workers, the Health Secretary told the conference:

"The number of nurses working in NHS Wales continues to increase year on year. There are more nurses working here in our NHS than ever before; something to be celebrated,

"We do however recognise there are challenges around the recruitment of nurses in primary and secondary care – that's why we developed our successful This is Wales: Train Work Live campaign to attract more staff here for the future.

"Pay and the public sector pay cap is an issue for those already in the profession and those considering a career in nursing. We have called, repeatedly, on the UK Government to end the cap on public sector pay and give workers across the UK a much-deserved pay rise.

"Any lifting of the cap must be funded by the UK Government, doing so ourselves would mean £50 million coming out of the budget for NHS Wales alone. This would threaten thousands of public sector jobs and impact on the services we value and rely on. I know NHS staff do not want a pay rise on the back of redundancies in local government and other public services.

"I have written to the Secretary of State for Health, Jeremy Hunt on two occasions calling for an end to the cap; he has not given me the courtesy of a response thus far."