

Reopening of Ebbw Vale line highly successful, new report finds

Peter Brett Associates, in partnership with Beaufort Research and Loxley Consultancy has undertaken a final evaluation of the European Regional Development Fund funded Valleys Rail Strengthening (VRS) Project.

The VRS was principally a Welsh Government initiative intended to support enhanced services on key rail corridors (most notably Ebbw Vale) linking the Valleys with Cardiff. The total project cost was £22,674,978, including £8,478,945 European Regional Development Fund grant monies. The project ran from 1st April 2008 to 30th April 2011.

The evaluation consisted of two distinct strands and considered both the new services on the reopened Ebbw Vale Line in February 2008 between Ebbw Vale Parkway and Cardiff Central, and the provision of additional rolling stock to provide strengthened services at peak times on the; Merthyr Tydfil to Aberdare, Bridgend to Barry Island, Treherbert to Cardiff Central and Rhymney to Cardiff Central lines.

The Ebbw Vale line was reopened in order to reduce the level of car usage – particularly single occupancy commuting – improve access to employment opportunities and key services and reduce harmful greenhouse gas emission levels on roads by providing enhanced rail services during peak travel times.

The main findings of the report show the VRS has:

- delivered a 19% increase in capacity on the Valleys rail network
- increased travel-to-work by rail on strengthened lines by 88% between 2001 and 2011
- removed around 14 million road kilometres annually
- improved local air quality
- generated around £1 million of gross economic benefits per annum
- transformed access to the jobs market, and
- facilitated new housing developments in Ebbw Vale and Rogerstone

Economy and Transport Secretary, Ken Skates said:

“I was very pleased to note this report found that our funding to reopen the Ebbw Vale Line has provided a significant boost to the economy of Ebbw Vale. The report justifies the significant investment that has been made by Welsh Government in the area over many years and provides an important example of how devolution has positively shaped the local community and its economy.

“The report concludes that this is exactly the type of project which should be developed under the Metro concept and a best practice example of where targeted government investment in infrastructure can support wider economic development and

regeneration.

“No transport project is undertaken for its own sake – it is always a means to enabling and facilitating a wider package of policy initiatives through improving access to markets. The strong peak in rail passenger growth across South-East Wales would have been unlikely without the introduction of better service.

“As set out last week, we want a transport network that prioritises people and businesses – a truly resilient and modern system for the benefit of the people of Wales.”

Funding boost for Cwmcarn Forest

This project has received funding from Caerphilly County Borough Council and through the Welsh Government Rural Communities – rural Development Programme 2014-2020, which is funded by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development and the Welsh Government.

The funding, from the Welsh Government Tourist Amenity Investment Support (TAIS) scheme to the tune of £128,000 with an additional £32,000 coming from Caerphilly County Borough Council, will enable the ever-popular visitor attraction to enhance its visitor offer, through developing more family focused activities and enhancing existing facilities.

The funding will allow for a number of improvements at the attraction including:

- Expansion of bike trails – a popular destination for mountain bikers across Wales and beyond, the funding will provide up to an additional 3km of new trail to the existing network;
- Enhancing existing walking trails – upgrades and improvements to the existing footpath network, to include new directional signage throughout the site, including new way-marking and interpretation at key locations and points of interest;
- Creating a new welcome and arrival zone at the entrance to the site – including feature dry-stone walling, new flooring, signage, interpretation and artwork, as well as new planting of natural species of trees and flowers in the welcome zone.

Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member with responsibility for tourist attractions, Cllr Sean Morgan said:

“Cwmcarn Forest remains one of the county borough’s premier tourism venues, attracting walkers and mountain bikers from across Wales

and even further beyond. This substantial grant funding will hugely benefit the attraction, allowing us to enhance the offering for visitors for many years to come.”

Tourism Minister, Lord Elis-Thomas, said:

“The Tourism Amenity Investment Support scheme is an excellent way for us to assist the tourism sector to make the improvements to the local facilities and amenities. Visitors expect the best quality in all aspects of their visit from the accommodation through to information provision, toilets and parking. This is an opportunity for us to help the industry get the building blocks right. I’m delighted that the funding is enabling a number of improvements to take place at this popular attraction and have been delighted to see exciting plans for development today.”

The project is also key to the development of a Valleys Landscape Park, and is a model which Cabinet Secretary for Local Government and Public Services and chair of the Valleys Taskforce, Alun Davies said he is keen to see replicated in other areas.

He said:

“I am determined we unlock the true potential of the South Wales Valleys, and can do so by harnessing the power of our natural landscape. Our proposals for a Valleys Landscape Park aim to do just that, and will help link these fabulous new facilities at Cwmcarn Forest with other attractions in the area and draw in more visitors to this beautiful area.”

[First Minister sets out vision for trade post-Brexit](#)

The Brexit trade paper, supported by an economic impact analysis from Cardiff Business School, argues the Welsh economy is best protected by retaining full access to the European Single Market and membership of a customs union.

The paper sets out the severe impact a hard Brexit would have on Welsh jobs and the economy. If the UK were to move to World Trade Organisation (WTO) rules, the Welsh economy could shrink by 8% – 10%, which would be the equivalent of between £1,500 and £2,000 per person in Wales.

The report shows the Welsh economy would be disproportionately impacted by a hard Brexit and identifies that the sectors most at risk from tariffs are automotive, chemicals, steel and electrical engineering, while the aerospace industry is most at risk from non-tariff barriers. These are sectors which are amongst the most productive in Wales and provide a large number of highly-skilled, well-paid jobs.

The trade paper calls on the UK government to provide evidence of how new trade deals would replace the benefits of access to the EU. The Welsh Government also wants decisions on new trading relationships with the EU and the wider world to be taken in partnership with devolved administrations to fully reflect the interests of all parts of the UK.

Launching the document at Zodiac Aerospace in Cwmbran – a world leader in aerospace equipment and systems – the First Minister said:

“Welsh exports are worth £14.6bn each year, with 61% of Welsh exports and just under half of our imports going to and from the EU. Wales is currently attracting record levels of inward investment, which is largely due to our access to the EU’s 500m customers.

“As our trade paper highlights, moving to WTO rules and the imposition of tariffs could have a catastrophic impact on our lamb sector and on the Welsh shellfish industry, which currently exports around 90% of their produce to the EU.

“These hard facts underline what is at stake if the UK government fails to get the right deal for the UK or we crash out of the EU without one.

“I fundamentally disagree with the Prime Minister’s well worn phrase that ‘no deal is better than a bad deal’ and believe leaving the Single Market and the Customs Unions would be hugely damaging for Welsh businesses and jobs, with our agricultural, food producers and automotive sectors being particularly hard hit.

“Ministers in London have yet to show us any evidence of the benefits of leaving the Single Market and the Customs Union or how new trade deals would replace the benefits of access to the EU. In fact, UK government documents that have come to light this week chime with our own analysis of a post-Brexit economy.

Today’s paper is a constructive, evidence-based contribution as the UK government prepares for phase 2 if the EU exit negotiations.”

The First Minister added:

“The paper I am launching today is a positive vision of Wales as an outward looking, globally trading nation, open to the wider world

while maintaining our strong trade with the EU. It sets out the need for a post-Brexit deal that enables Welsh goods to keep flowing into the EU without new obstacles or costs, whilst recognising the significant trading opportunities outside of Europe.

“I urge the UK government to give serious consideration to our proposals and work with us to develop a post-Brexit trade policy which protects Welsh jobs and the economy.”

[Health Secretary confirms Perjeta \(pertuzumab\) will be available on NHS in Wales to treat advanced breast cancer](#)

The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence has today recommended Perjeta (pertuzumab) be made routinely available. In preparation for the NICE recommendation, NHS Wales has been working closely with the medicine’s manufacturer Roche, to reach an agreement to ensure it is available.

Under the terms of the Welsh Government’s New Treatment Fund health boards in Wales must now make Perjeta available within 60 days.

Perjeta provides treatment for people whose HER2-positive breast cancer has returned to the breast but is inoperable, or where it has spread to other parts of the body.

Vaughan Gething said:

“I’m pleased that Perjeta (pertuzumab) will now be routinely available on the Welsh NHS for people with advanced breast cancer. The Welsh Government’s flagship £80m New Treatment Fund is making more medicines available quicker than ever before. On average, new medicines are now being made available in only 10 days following recommendation. This means people with life-threatening conditions are getting much faster access to the latest medicines when they need them.”

The announcement could potentially benefit up to 50 women a year in Wales.

Dr Catherine Bale, Consultant Medical Oncologist, Associate Medical Director, Wales Cancer Network said:

“This is extremely welcome news for our ladies with advanced breast cancer who will now have the opportunity to benefit from this effective treatment which can both prolong life and maintain quality of life. Making effective treatments available in a timely way to the population of Wales remains a priority and the New Treatment Fund is making this a reality for patients now.”

Latest categorisation reveals improvement in school performance

Introduced in 2014, the National School Categorisation System places schools into one of four colour-coded support categories to demonstrate the level of support they need – green, yellow, amber and red.

There are now more schools in the green and yellow categories when compared to last year. Green schools require just four days of support and yellow schools receive up to 10 days of support.

This year sees a small change to the factors that decide a school’s category. Instead of just looking at areas such as performance, including GCSE results, there is now a much broader assessment that considers areas such as teacher assessments from other subjects, wellbeing and the quality of teaching and learning.

The purpose of including a broader and more sophisticated range of factors is to understand the kind of support needed by a school and to give parents a better picture of how a school is performing.

Out of over 1,500 schools across Wales only 4 appealed against their category.

In summary:

- 85.3 per cent of primary schools and 68.3 per cent of secondary schools are now in the green and yellow categories. This increase from last year continues the upward trend since 2015.
- There has been a very small rise in the proportion of red schools – those identified as needing most support – by 0.4 percentage points in the primary sector and 2.9 percentage points in the secondary sector.
- 45 per cent of special schools have been categorised as green, and needing less support, with no schools categorised as red and in need of most support.

Cabinet Secretary for Education Kirsty Williams said:

“I’m pleased to see that more schools are now in the green and yellow categories, which continues with the upward trend we have seen over the past few years.

“These schools have a key role to play in supporting other schools to improve by sharing their expertise, skills and good practice.

“Last September, I announced that to further raise schools standards we would make changes to the school categorisation system following advice from the OECD.

“As well as taking into account a much broader range of factors about a school’s ability to improve, categorisation now places more of an emphasis on discussions about how the school could improve – leading to a tailored programme of support, challenge and intervention.

“I’m confident that the changes we have made to the categorisation process are in the best interests of pupils and will help ensure schools are given the right support at the right time.”