

Welsh transport minister backs 'phased devolution'

WELSH TRANSPORT Minister Mark Hooper says 'phased devolution' of the rest of the Welsh rail infrastructure would be acceptable to the new Plaid Cymru government.

The Labour Welsh Government secured devolution of the Core Valley Lines in South Wales. The rest of the Wales & Borders network remains under UK Government control. Plaid Cymru is pressing for full devolution as part of a proposed Wales Bill in Westminster.

Mr Hooper told the Senedd in July that full devolution would integrate track and train in Wales in a similar way to the UK Government is seeking to achieve in England. For cross-border services and infrastructure, a proposed partnership role for the Welsh and UK Governments and Great British Railways would "deliver effective management," he said.

Apart from the CVL, there are other routes, such as Cogan to Penarth and Newport to Ebbw Vale, which are entirely in Wales and used only by TfW Rail. Their transfer to Welsh Government ownership could be simpler and potentially happen sooner than the proposed full devolution with cross-border agreements.

Mr Hooper told *Modern Railways* that he had no preference on whether devolution is phased or not. "I'm a pragmatist, so it's made sense for us to do it in the way we've done it so far, with the Core Valley Lines," he said. "That's a lesson to show how

we could take a piece at a time, but ultimately, we want full devolution.

"If it came in one fell swoop, then I'd be happy and ready to go with that. If it came in a way that's more piecemeal, then I'd work with that too. What we've got to do, though, is focus on the end game, and the quicker we can get there, the better."

The Welsh Government declined rail infrastructure devolution in the early 2000s because of concerns about the potential liabilities for what was then a new institution. Network Rail subsequently spent significant amounts of money on repairs or renewals on the Cambrian Coast, Conwy Valley and other Welsh lines, but Mr Hooper does not believe that liabilities should prevent devolution.

With its stewardship of the Welsh trunk roads and its development and operation of the CVL, "I think we've proven ourselves to be adept and capable of running a network," he said.

In his statement to the Senedd, he said: "The network in Wales makes up around 10% of the total British network by track length, yet, over the past 15 years, Wales has received only 1.5% of the total investment in enhancements. And starkly, only 9% per cent of the network is electrified, largely as a result of the Core Valleys Lines, compared to 45% in England and 33% in Scotland."

Parties across the Senedd chamber had "acknowledged the unfairness of HS2 funding", he continued. "We have lost out on consequential

funding of £850 million up to the end of this Spending Review period." The Scottish Government has received around £1.3 billion in additional funding as a result of comparability with HS2 under the Barnett Formula, and the Northern Ireland Executive around £0.5 billion, he said.

Network Rail's Wales Route covers 923 miles of track in Wales and the border counties of England. According to the Office of Rail and Road (ORR), Great Britain's rail network has a track length of 19,409 miles and total route length of 9,784 miles.

If Wales were to receive the 10% funding share claimed by its government, this would reflect track or route length on both sides of the border. Mr Hooper told *Modern Railways* that some of the funding would be used for capacity enhancement on the Marches line and around Chester. "A lot of these works that we want to progress, although they might be in England, they support our overall network." He added that liaison with other parties, including English local authorities, would be vital.

In February, the UK Government committed to a pipeline of Welsh rail infrastructure enhancements costing at up to £14 billion. It did not increase the £445 million allocation that was made in last year's Spending Review. Mr Hooper said he was focusing on Wales receiving a larger allocation for the £14 billion investment programme in the next Spending

Review, but his government would be pleased if further funding were to be provided before then.

One ambition for early release of more funding is to accelerate construction of new stations on the main line east of Cardiff. They were recommended in 2020 by a commission tasked with exploring alternatives to building a new section of the M4 around Newport, but the start of construction of the first two stations has been delayed to 2029.

The new Welsh Government says a roads-based solution is needed in addition to the rail intervention. Mr Hooper said it would be useful to have real-world data on usage of the new stations and their effect on M4 traffic, before making decisions on the road enhancements.

The £14 billion pipeline includes capacity and line speed improvements on the Marches line and Cardiff to Abergavenny local services, over the line's southern end. Asked about priorities for Marches line investment, Mr Hooper said he was interested in the whole line but that his first priority was resolving issues in the catchment area of the M4 at Newport.

Transport for Wales has revived proposals for a new station at Caerleon, north east of Newport. Car traffic from Caerleon towards Cardiff joins the M4 near the Brynglas Tunnels bottleneck.

British Rail did not reopen Caerleon station because of the time penalty of the additional station call for Marches trains from Shrewsbury and further north. TfW proposes a turnback facility at Abergavenny for local services to Cardiff which would enable services from Manchester and Holyhead to call at fewer stations. Rhodri Clark

Devolution calls: the new Welsh transport minister says 'phased devolution' is acceptable for the rest of the Welsh rail network; the Core Valley Lines already being under control of the Welsh Government. On 2 August, TfW Rail Nos 153507/362 stand at Llandelio with the 12.08 Shrewsbury-Swansea. John Stretton

