

Unlocking Enterprise and Creativity in Mid & SW Wales: a rail-based approach

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The Heart of Wales Line (HoWL) should become the catalyst for sustainable development in Mid-Wales as a whole, bringing in wider social, economic and environmental benefits but respecting and celebrating the distinctiveness of the area. Culture, in the broadest sense, is central to this. There is something very special indeed about Mid Wales that takes in not only landscape and history, but language, tradition and also modernity in the sense of small, mutual, creative and sustainable approaches to life. If that creativity can be harnessed and the railway seen as an energising spine there is the potential to create something really radical and pioneering in Mid Wales.

So how to unlock the creativity and power that exists in Mid Wales but in a way that reflects and re-inforces that mutual, co-operative and small-scale way of doing things? If a means can be found to harness and direct that power, the solutions to the specific 'railway' problems will emerge. These need focus and hard work but the bigger issue is getting a much wider project on the move which has the railway at its heart. It should be about making things happen sooner rather than later, with a longer-term vision underpinning it. Here are some elements of that vision:

- To develop Mid-Wales as a pioneer of small-scale sustainable development, based along transport corridors, particularly the Heart of Wales Line
- To see stations as hubs for community activity, with a presumption in favour of affordable housing and business development located at or close to stations.
- Developing areas at and around stations serving larger communities (e.g. Pontarddulais, Ammanford, Llandeilo, Llandovery, Llandrindod, Craven Arms) as complementary centres of innovation, culture and creativity, with state-of-the-art digital communications.
- A Mid Wales economy which is based on a dynamic mix of private and socially-owned enterprises, working together and sharing ideas and resources. Could the Heart of Wales Line become a linear 'Mondragon' supporting a network of co-operative enterprise?
- Attracting people to live and work in Mid Wales; a place that young people with ideas and energy are attracted to, with suitable affordable housing and workspace available
- Sustainable tourism is an important element of the economy, but there is scope for developing more sectors using existing talent in the area: in digital industries, culture, food and small-scale manufacturing
- To achieve the vision, Mid Wales needs suitable infrastructure, to get around within the area and to have connectivity with larger urban centres in Wales and in England. The railway should be at the centre of this, with a complementary network of bus services.

The need for a can-do organisation: The Heart of Wales Line Enterprise Network: HoWLEN

There is a need for a body which can drive this forward, but it will only work if it is led by 'do'ers' and suitably resourced: so step forward *The Heart of Wales Line Enterprise Network*. The rail 'corridor' between Llanelli and Craven Arms offers the framework for a range of linked developments with stations acting as hubs – the 'necklace' concept, with stations becoming pearls on a string. But the corridor is far wider than just the railway itself and there needs to be ways of connecting with towns and villages several miles from the railway and encouraging action that can bring all of them together.

The railway dimension

The business should not aim to be an embryonic microfranchise. Leave the running of the trains to the train operator, though encourage more cost-effective ways of working, with Network Rail. The HoWLEN should work alongside the railway and complement its contribution, not try to replace it. It should focus on promoting sustainable development along the railway corridor, and that may involve projects at stations – but as a third party. It could also be involved in joint projects with independent train operators, e.g. charter operations, a regular tourist train etc. However, HoWLEN should work with its partners to influence the 2018 Wales and Borders franchise so that the line gets a major improvement in service, with better rolling stock, substantially improved frequencies and inter-connecting bus services. The train operator (both existing and the new franchisee) should be part of the HoWLEN with a senior manager on the board.

Resources

HoWLEN will need to be well resourced, with talented and dynamic team with complementary expertise but above all with rural development skills. The body should be a multi-stakeholder co-operative, set up with help from the Wales Co-operative Centre. The co-operative's board membership should have people who bring a really good mix of skills and creativity to the business. Advice, support could come from Powys, Carmarthenshire, Shropshire and other local authorities, as well as the Co-operative Centre and different parts of the Welsh Government.

To emphasise the 'railway' connection, the business should be located at a station along the line, either in an existing or – ideally - a new building incorporating leading-edge sustainable design principles. Llandeilo would seem to offer an ideal location, with available land. A Mid Wales Rural Enterprise centre in the old station yard would ring the immediate area back to life but be a catalyst for a wider range of developments. Could that be the centrepiece of the overall project? It needs something of that sort of scale to help drive a lot of smaller initiatives.

Short-term wins

Many good ideas came out of the 'Unlocking Mid Wales' conference which could be implemented quickly. For example:

- Line-long festival
- Linking up with local cultural events
- New developments at stations
- On-train hosts
- Promote local food and drink along the line
- New designs for small station buildings

A longer-term business plan should come out of ongoing, formal and informal, discussions with business and community activists. Avoid being prescriptive! Encourage risk-taking, be willing to change if something isn't working.

Conclusion

The railway has a huge contribution to make to Mid Wales but the way to 'unlock' that contribution isn't to try and run the railway but to look at a wholly new way of focusing linked development along the railway corridor. It needs resources to do it - not a lot in overall terms but significantly more than the resources that are currently deployed through the HoWL Forum.