

Senedd Cymru / Welsh Parliament

Pwyllgor Diwylliant, y Gymraeg a Chyfathrebu / Culture, Welsh Language and Communications Committee

Ymchwiliad i'r achosion o COVID-19 ac effaith y feirws ar ddiwylliant, y diwydiannau creadigol, treftadaeth, cyfathrebu a chwaraeon / Inquiry into the COVID-19 outbreak and its impact on culture, creative industries, heritage, communications and sport

CWLC COV22

Ymateb gan The Pontypool and Blaenavon Railway Company / Response from The Pontypool and Blaenavon Railway Company

Inquiry into the COVID-19 outbreak and its impact on culture, creative industries, heritage, communications and sport: Pontypool and Blaenavon Railway evidence

What has been the immediate impact of Covid-19 on the sector?

Heritage railways have been significantly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, and the Pontypool and Blaenavon Railway has been no exception. Social distancing and lockdown measures came as we prepared to reopen to the public following our general winter closure period. As such, we have not had any visitor income since December 2019. We will continue to lose the income and volunteer labour that normally sustains our operation for as long as such measures are in place; and we are currently having to plan ahead for substantially reduced footfall when we are able to reopen.

Although passenger services and voluntary activities are suspended in line with Welsh Government legislation and advice, we and other railways still have continuing overhead costs to meet. At present we are drawing upon reserves to meet these obligations, an arrangement that cannot last past the autumn. Whilst we have received generous public donations to our COVID-19 appeal, the sums raised remain small in comparison to our ongoing costs.

Ultimately, and in common with many other heritage railways, whilst we have long survived in a largely self-sustainable manner, the COVID-19 pandemic poses severe challenges to our business. If left unaddressed, these could threaten the survival of both our railway and others across Wales.

How effectively has the support provided by the Welsh Government, the UK Government and arms-length bodies addressed the sector's needs?

Initially, there appeared very few avenues of support available for our railway. As a small volunteer-run organisation, we did not qualify for many of the early measures offered. This was somewhat frustrating, given our continuing overhead costs. However, following the very welcome broadening of the Welsh Government's Business Grants scheme to include properties eligible for Small Business Rates Relief, we have now applied for financial support from this stream. We are currently awaiting a decision on this application from Torfaen Council.

What will the likely long-term impacts of Covid-19 be on the sector, and what support is needed to deal with those?

Firstly, it is likely that we will see our income significantly reduced for the foreseeable future. Notwithstanding the revenue lost as long as lockdown are in place, even when we are able to reopen, we will continue to see far fewer visitors than usual for as long as social distancing measures are in place. Furthermore, it is likely that we will also see a reduction of income from our membership base. Besides comprising our volunteer pool, these provide crucial funds via annual membership fees. However, many meet one or more of the following descriptions: they are elderly; have underlying health conditions; or are employed in occupations vulnerable to the pandemic's wider economic fallout. As such, they may reduce both their physical and economic contribution to the railway, threatening our self-sustainability. Several possible ways that public bodies can help support our sector adapt to these changes are outlined below.

Secondly, operating costs and staffing needs will increase as we adapt to new COVID-19

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guidelines. For example, to enable safe social distancing amongst visitors and volunteers, we will have to run longer trains with larger locomotives. Besides the resulting immediate increase in fuel costs, the additional wear and tear will cause general maintenance costs to rise over the longer term. We will also need to implement a new cleaning regime to meet recommendations from both public health bodies and the [Office of Rail and Road](#). Support to implement such measures, whether this be financial or physical, would be greatly welcomed.

Finally, like many other heritage railways, our plans to develop are now threatened. Aside from larger aspirations such as the extension of our running line, we are currently exploring the feasibility of various smaller projects that would significantly enhance the visitor experience. Such plans attract more visitors to our railway, with an increase in visitor spending in the local area, thereby generating a wider positive return on investment. However, the dearth of finances may prevent these projects from coming to fruition. Support for such plans – whether on a broader or case-by-case basis – will ensure that our sector can long continue to be an important Welsh cultural, social and economic asset.

What lessons can be learnt from how the Welsh Government, the UK Government, arms-length bodies and the sector have dealt with Covid-19?

The main lessons that could be learnt from the COVID-19 crisis surround the provision of early advice and support for smaller organisations that do not qualify for schemes targeted towards larger businesses. In addition to providing early breathing space, earlier support will reduce that needed required by such organisations over the longer term. This may also make it easier for such businesses to repay any support loans issued to them at a later date.

How might the sector evolve after Covid-19, and how can the Welsh Government support such innovation to deal with future challenges?

As outlined above, we and many other similar organisations have long sustained ourselves primarily from tourist revenue and volunteer manpower. However, the probable longer-term social and economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, together with similar general changes underway, could call this model into question. Going forward, our sector will have to adapt to new realities to continue being a cultural and economic asset to Wales. There are many possible ways in which the Welsh Government and other public bodies can support this innovation whilst simultaneously using heritage railways to support their own goals.

Firstly, support to help expand and diversify the sector's visitor base will help heritage railways continue to survive in a predominantly self-sustainable way. This is especially the case for smaller operations like ours that currently rely heavily upon tourists and enthusiasts for income. In supporting heritage railways to achieve this, the Welsh Government could use them to achieve its own cultural goals. For example, this year we intended to introduce a programme of educational visits. Besides diversifying our income base, this would have provided a positive contribution to the cultural enrichment of local school pupils. Therefore, the Welsh Government could, for example, help railways develop Curriculum for Wales-based resources, and support

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the development of links with educational bodies. Such support would ultimately help achieve goals that the Welsh Government has set out in both the Well-being of Future Generations Act (2015) and 'Light Springs through the Dark: A Vision for Culture in Wales' (2016).

Secondly, support to help establish links with other businesses and organisations would not only help increase heritage railway's cultural contribution to Wales, but at the same time also play a role in improving the resilience of the Welsh economy. For example, we currently have established partnerships with Network Rail Wales, a local engineering firm, and a local railway maintenance firm. The subsequent skills, knowledge and expertise developed, together with shared outcomes achieved, are mutually beneficial to all parties. As such, Welsh Government support to develop such links would help ensure that heritage railways are not only cultural assets, but far broader economic and social ones too.

Lastly, support to help heritage railways improve their visitor and volunteer facilities will do much to continue making them attractive options for visitors and volunteers in the future. Such support would allow the Welsh Government to work proactively with heritage railways to help it achieve its own objectives and aims.