

Janice Gregory AM
Committee Chair
Communities and Culture Committee
Cardiff Bay
Cardiff
CF99 1NA

PO Box 114
Chepstow NP16 6WR
w www.passengerfocus.org.uk
t 0300 123 2140 f 0161 244 5981
e info@passengerfocus.org.uk
direct 07918 626124
e simon.pickering@passengerfocus.org.uk

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Dear Ms Gregory

Passenger Focus response to Major Sporting Events consultation

Passenger Focus, the independent consumer watchdog for Great Britain, welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Communities and Culture Committee's inquiry into 'Making the most of Major Sporting Events'. Our interest in responding to the inquiry reflects the prominent role that the rail network plays in bringing spectators to major sporting events in Wales, most particularly at the Millennium Stadium in Cardiff. Our response highlights some of the issues for passengers in accessing such events, and as such is relevant to a number of your questions (e.g. Q7).

With its close proximity to Cardiff Central station, a large percentage of the crowd for sporting (and other) events at the Millennium Stadium make use of rail to reach the venue. While this is very much to be welcomed, it must also be recognised that it places significant strain on the rail network, both in terms of station and train capacity, that is not designed to cater for this volume of passengers on a regular basis. Consequently, Passenger Focus often receives complaints from passengers, both formally and informally, about some of the difficulties involved in accessing sporting events at the Millennium Stadium. These complaints most commonly relate to the crowding of rail services on event days and the length of queues to access them, while disruption caused by engineering works and/or infrastructure problems have also featured on a number of occasions.

Reflecting these passenger concerns, Passenger Focus organised a series of meetings in 2006/7 with key rail industry stakeholders (including Arriva Trains Wales, First Great Western, Network Rail, Welsh Assembly Government and the British Transport Police) that led to a number of improvements such as the better sharing of forward calendar information.

While progress has clearly been made in the last few years, such as the better scheduling of engineering works, difficulties still exist - most notably in terms of capacity. The franchising system, as well as the current shortage of rolling stock within the rail industry, means that both ATW and FGW frequently tell us that they do not have any spare carriages to run longer or additional trains to address overcrowding issues.



Such vulnerabilities can be particularly tested by the scheduling of events, such as late kick-off times. For example, Passenger Focus is currently concerned about the availability of sufficient rail capacity to meet passenger demand for the 2010 RBS Six Nations Championship game between Wales and France on 10 February. This match is scheduled for a late kick-off (8pm) and, consequently, the train companies have already raised concerns about the difficulty this will present in meeting passenger demand after the game.

In addition to the immediate capacity issues, late kick-offs also reduce the opportunities to use connecting transport services (rail or bus). Consequently, they cut down on the ability of spectators to get to and/or from such events by public transport and so result in more car use. Our discussions with the Millennium Stadium highlights that the scheduling of events is often driven by television schedules. While we appreciate the importance of television to both the profile and the economics of an event, our view is that event scheduling needs to balance the needs of those attending the game at the Stadium with those watching away from the venue.

In addition to capacity, punctuality and reliability are also of the utmost importance to rail passengers. Indeed, our research into passenger priorities in Wales finds that the punctuality of services is the second highest priority for rail users behind only value-for-money of their tickets. Give their time sensitivity and the high demand for services on these days, the importance of punctuality and reliability can be expected to be further magnified on an event days, highlighting the need for continued progress by the rail industry in these areas. For example, it is important that the rail industry meets its recent pledge to ensure trains (rather than bus replacement services) are always running on the London Paddington – Cardiff Central route.

The needs of disabled passengers must also be considered when planning events. Provision for disabled passengers can be constrained by factors such as the number of reserveable wheelchair spaces on trains. Some sporting events, for example the Paralympics in London in 2012, can be expected to attract a higher proportion of disabled passengers, so Wales would particularly need to consider the transport implications for disabled passengers if intending to stage similar events.

When rail problems blight a sporting event at the Millennium Stadium there can be a significant impact on its reputation, and that of Wales more generally, to successfully stage major sporting events. For example, consider the impact of the following headline and opening paragraph from *The Times* following travel disruption to the 2007 Carling Cup Final:

To hell and back . . . how Cardiff trip was final straw for fans

Perhaps only football administrators would think that it was a good idea to stage the final of an English competition in Wales and not for the first time on Sunday it was ordinary fans who suffered.”

(*The Times*, 27/02/2007 - www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/sport/football/article1444338.ece)



Consequently, we would emphasise the importance of considering transport issues when planning major sporting events in Wales. The Welsh Assembly may also want to consider the merits of a strategic review of transportation to events at the Millennium Stadium, across all modes and consider the potential contribution of non-franchised rail services.

With specific regards to the Ryder Cup in Newport in October 2010, Passenger Focus welcomes the fact that attracting this event has helped secure a £22 million redevelopment programme of Newport rail station – a legacy that rail passengers will continue to enjoy for years to come. Identifying opportunities to secure permanent benefits to the transportation network as part of meeting the logistical requirements of a sporting event is to be welcomed. The rail network will clearly play an important role in spectator access to the Ryder Cup, so it is vital that robust plans are put in place and that clear passenger information is available well in advance. We will be discussing these issues with the rail industry in detail.

In conclusion, Passenger Focus welcomes the Committee's review of sporting events and the railway in Wales. In planning such events it is important that due consideration is given to transport issues to ensure not only that potential disruption to passenger journeys are minimized, but also that the opportunities for infrastructure and/or service enhancement are identified and secured.

I would be pleased to provide further information on any of the above to the Committee, including in person, should that be of interest.

Yours sincerely,

Simon Pickering
Passenger Link Manager (Wales)