



ORR's annual assessment of Network Rail's Wales & Borders route 2025 to 2026

Letter

14 July 2026

Dear Alexia, Stuart,

Subject: ORR's annual assessment of Network Rail's Wales & Borders route

I am writing to you to present our assessment of Network Rail's Wales & Borders route's performance in 2025-26. The Wales & Borders route is located within Network Rail's Wales & Western region. It operates and maintains the railway across Wales and the border counties of England. An evaluation of Network Rail's national performance can be found in our 2025-26 Annual Assessment of Network Rail.

Delivering a reliable and punctual service for passengers

The Wales & Borders route has had an encouraging year for passenger train performance. Both punctuality and reliability have improved, continuing a positive trend this control period. Network Rail has focused on delivering the performance improvement plan which we mandated in our final order of July 2024, following our finding of licence breach in respect of railway service performance. It acted on our recommendations and has established better processes and governance for managing train performance. As a result, we have assessed that Network Rail has complied with our enforcement order.

Network Rail has delivered all 13 of its committed performance improvement activities specific to the Wales & Borders route. Notable activities delivered have included trespass and route crime prevention, remote condition monitoring, a taskforce to optimise the December 2025 timetable

and a Port Talbot freight growth readiness programme (noted below).

The route has also derived performance improvement benefits from the completion of 15 regional plan activities which have delivered improved capability, timetable modelling, operations during severe weather, and incident learning. The region has devolved several of the resources that the route depends on to manage train performance and plans for further operational devolution during this summer. Network Rail also reports making good progress with its weather resilience programme, which includes Wales route coverage. That programme is due to complete at the end of 2028 and we will continue to monitor its progress.

The route's targeted focus on train performance has supported further improvement in passenger train punctuality and reliability. Time to 3 performance continued to improve, increasing from 76.0% in 2024-25 to 79.0% in 2025-26. Network Rail caused delay per 1,000 miles also improved and was better than its own target.

Passenger cancellations also further improved this year. They reduced from 5.3% to 3.9% during the year and did better than its own target.

Delivering for freight

Freight cancellations further improved during the year, reducing from 2.6% in 2024-25 to 2.0% and meeting the route's target for Year 2 of control period 7 (CP7).

Freight growth on the Wales & Borders route declined during the year, impacted by lower demand for construction materials and instability in fuel (petroleum) traffic. Network Rail has made preparations for the uplift in scrap metal flows expected when construction of the electric arc furnace at Port Talbot is completed. It has made changes to the railway timetable to enable the effective movement of freight and has made improvements to freight infrastructure together with partners for enhanced loads checking, railhead lighting and ground staff welfare shelter. Network Rail has also built a new drainage system at a high-flooding location which was impacting freight accessibility to Newport Docks. We expect Network Rail to continue to pursue opportunities to support and increase rail freight.

Improving asset reliability

Asset reliability on the Wales & Borders route, as measured using the Composite Reliability Index (CRI), slightly improved during the year. The route finished the year with a CRI score of 2.4% against its target of -5.8%. This means it was 8.2 percentage points better than its target, and 2.4% better

than it was in the final year of control period 6 (CP6).

CRI is a composite measure of seven asset groups. The reliability of the route's electrical power, telecoms and track assets improved, while the reliability of its buildings, points, signalling and structures assets deteriorated. Reliability worsened most markedly for signalling (-4.5%) and structures (-2.1%) both of which failed to meet the route's targets. Buildings and points reliability also declined but achieved the route's targets.

The Wales & Western region has broadly achieved its revised asset renewals plan for the year, albeit significantly under-delivering structures renewals. The region has reduced its CP7 renewals plans due to cost pressures (including high inflation), which has impacted its forecasted asset sustainability, which is likely to decline further than planned at the outset of CP7 and to fall short of the target we set. We have challenged Network Rail to better demonstrate how it will mitigate the effects of asset condition and its impact on future safety and performance outcomes.

The region has taken some action on structural asset assessments and eliminating visual and detailed examination backlogs for operational property but has not yet achieved compliance. We have commissioned an independent review to identify the root causes for non-compliance, which will report in autumn 2026.

Enhancing the network

Enhancements activity on the Wales & Borders route has continued to develop steadily over the past year, with Network Rail working in close partnership with Transport for Wales and the Welsh Government to progress schemes that support capacity, connectivity and future service growth.

A key area of progress has been the development of enhancements at Cardiff Central station. Network Rail is working collaboratively with Transport for Wales to deliver a package of improvements, including expanded and improved gatelines, a new southern entrance and measures to improve passenger flow through the station. These enhancements are important in addressing existing capacity constraints and improving the overall passenger experience at Wales' busiest station.

Further schemes are progressing which will play an enabling role in future timetable uplifts and network capability. The South Wales Relief Lines Upgrade is a key intervention, supporting the development of new stations and additional services, and we expect to see this scheme continue to progress in the coming year. Similarly, enhancements at Padeswood Junction will improve

freight access to the nearby cement terminal while also creating additional capacity for passenger and other freight services.

Network Rail is also continuing its programme of level crossing interventions across Wales. These works will support future service increases by improving safety and operational performance and will be an important component in enabling wider timetable enhancements.

Looking ahead, we expect Network Rail to continue progressing these schemes at pace, ensuring that early-stage development moves towards deliverable outcomes. Continued collaboration with stakeholders and partners will be essential to maintaining momentum and delivering on investment.

Looking ahead to Year 3 of CP7

Over the next year, we look forward to the Wales & Borders route building on the improved train performance that it has achieved over the last two years to provide passengers and freight customers with a stable and high-performing network. While recognising the cost pressures that it is operating under, we expect Network Rail to mitigate deterioration in asset condition and minimise the impact on future network reliability and outcomes.

Yours sincerely,

[signed]

Richard Coates

Deputy Director, Railway Planning and Performance

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