

Swansea Bay Metro project will not happen unless rail is devolved says its architect

Plans for a Swansea Bay Metro rail network will not happen unless rail powers are devolved in full to Wales, believes the project's architect.

The scheme, which envisages mainly utilising existing rail track, was initially outlined as a vision by Professor Mark Barry of Cardiff University, back in 2017. Since then the Welsh Government's transport body, Transport for Wales (TfW), have worked up for more detailed plans led by Ben George.

The first key phases of the proposed Metro scheme would see new local services including:

- Pontarddulais to Swansea via Neath using the Swansea District Line and new curve to connect to the South Wales Mainline.
- new stations at Pontlliw/Penllergaer, Felindre, Morryston, Llandarcy, Winch Wen and Landore to augment the existing stations at Swansea High Street, Neath, Llansamlet and Pontarddulais.
- Pembrey and Burry Port to Swansea with a new station at Cockett to augment those at Swansea High Street, Gowerton and Llanelli.

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However, with the UK Government's record of significant under

investment in Wales on rail enhancement projects and no Barnett consequential from high speed two – even though the project is being curtailed and will now only reach Birmingham from London – Prof Barry said the much needed scheme, which has demonstrated a strong cost benefit ratio, is unlikely to be funded.

In a new [LinkedIn blog entry](#) , Prof Barry says: “It’s a great scheme. It will provide much more public transport capacity helping to deliver our mode shift targets and enable more overt transit oriented development (TOD) across the region to be reinforced via local development plans and a regional strategic development plan.”

However, he said the project could struggle to get funded. He added: “Sadly, I am not very confident any of this can actually be delivered in the current climate and under the current constitutional arrangements in the UK – especially as regards rail. I see four major challenges.

” Rail powers and funding are non-devolved and so Welsh Government alone do not have the capital resource to able to deliver this scheme. Transport is not also part of the Swansea Bay City Deal and so this scheme has a lower profile at Westminster than would otherwise be the case – unlike the status of the South Wales Metro within the City Deal for the Cardiff Capital Region. In addition, the current impact of inflation on major infrastructure and the perilous state of government finances suggest that this really is not going to happen any time soon – if at all.”

He said the project also needed an on the ground champion or champions. He asked “Who is or are the local champions of this project – political, business groups, civic society, academia etc – working every day to make it happen?

“So, whilst development work has created an excellent scheme for the region, it just won’t happen unless and until Welsh

Government has fully devolved powers over rail and full barmetisation of all English rail spend, as is the case in Scotland. This has to be all English Network Rail spend, not just [HS2](#), which I have been making the case for since 2011 as set out in my evidence to the Westminster Transport Committee's review of high speed rail for the Cardiff Business Partnership.

"The new Wales Rail Board may well endorse this programme – however it does not have any access to the capital funding required to deliver it. I know this is an issue that is vexing the Burns delivery unit chaired by Simon Gibson in respect of the essential upgrades required on the South Wales Mainline in south east Wales."



The Burns delivery unit was set to look at how to implement the recommendations of the Burns commission – chaired by Lord Burns – which was set by the Welsh Government to look at how to improve public transport provision in south east Wales, back in 2018 after its decision not to proceed with an M4

Relief Road.

The commission recommended six stations along the South Wales Mainline at Newport Road in Cardiff, Newport West, Somerton, Llanwern and Magor and Undy. TfW has begun a consultation of the design of the five stations. There are also plans for a new mainline station at St Mellons- Cardiff Parkway – which was also endorsed by the Burns Commissions – which if approved would be funded privately funded.

All six stations were also recommended by the UK Government's Union Connectivity Review, chaired by Sir Peter Hendy. The cost of delivering the five new stations has yet to be finalised. However, it is not the cost of building stations, but also the required significant investment needed in realigning existing track, gantries being move, as well as upgrading relief lines. This could potentially see a final bill of around £250m to £300m.

As the line is a non-devolved rail asset, the Welsh Government will be looking to the UK Government to finance the stations. Cardiff Parkway would have a cost of around £120m and integrated into the proposed 900,000 sq ft Hendre Lakes Business Park. The Welsh Government, which has a minority equity stake in the company behind the two projects, Cardiff Parkway Developments, has [reopened](#) a planning hearing into the schemes.

Prof Barry said the level of UK underfunding of Welsh rail infrastructure over the last 30 years runs into the billions, which he described as a “scandal” and a position he fears will persist without constitutional change. He added: “The £1bn announcement by UK Government for electrification of the North Wales Mainline at some unspecified time in the future, without any details, does not materially change that analysis. We need to see all rail powers and funding (and full Barnett treatment of English rail expenditure thereof) vested with Welsh Government.

“The regions of England also need a more formulaic distribution of English capital funds for major rail investment. Too many major decisions related to essential economic infrastructure in the UK are made by a handful of politicians, advisors and bureaucrats in Westminster and Whitehall. This can never work for all places on this island – especially in Wales.

“More strategically from a UK perspective we need to borrow to invest in essential economic infrastructure, to deliver both our climate change obligations and also to support more equitable economic development across the UK. Given the scale of the climate emergency I suggest UK needs to borrow (like war bonds) and invest at least £500bn over 20 to 30 years to support investment in energy and public transport infrastructure.”

He said if Wales secured a fair share of this long term investment, and with more devolved powers in Cardiff Bay, projects like the Swansea Metro, alongside the electrification and upgrade of the South Wales Mainline – including new Burns stations and additional services to Bristol Temple Meads – could be brought forward.

The transport expert said it could also finance other much needed schemes in Wales like North Wales Mainline upgrade/electrification, Marches Line speed/capacity upgrade, Cardiff Crossrail/Circle lines, new phases of the South Wales Metro, and rail innovation in the west.

Prof Barry said: “So, delivery of the Swansea Metro is a political challenge as well as a constitutional economic and climate change one.

“I am looking at Labour’s Keir Starmer (leader), Rachel Reeves (shadow Chancellor and Louise Haigh (shadow Transport Secretary). I am sure Swansea Council leader Rob Stewart is on the case as well, as demonstrated by his contributions at a

recent Swansea Council meeting. He would also, I suspect, find common cause with the likes of Andy Burnham, Steve Rotheram and Tracy Brabin (English mayors) in calls for a more equitable distribution of UK Government funds for investment in essential economic infrastructure.”

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