

Missed Opportunity To Support Rail Decarbonisation? - Press Release

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Transport for Wales (TfW) takes over the Wales & Borders rail franchise from private operator KeolisAmey today, to safeguard the rail network amidst the pandemic. Pembrokeshire Friends Of the Earth fears that an opportunity to contribute to transport decarbonisation has been missed. For social justice and to tackle the climate emergency, we need public transport that “everyone can use, wants to use and does use.” The Welsh Government’s new transport strategy promises exactly this, but cannot deliver if TfW retain KeolisAmey’s plans for new trains.

We understand that, in preparing for today’s transfer, TfW has taken on all KeolisAmey’s commitments and not attempted to address the outdated and counterproductive elements of the private operator’s plans. The public should be made aware of this, particularly with the Senedd elections due to be held in May.

“Christ, that looks spartan”

The new class 197 trains are planned to be the mainstay of long-distance services, including several over 5 hours. Despite minor tweaks to an initial design described as ‘spartan’, the final product remains highly unsuitable with fewer toilets, fewer fixed tables and more space for standees than the current fleet. Some routes would even see a reduction in seating capacity.

Software engineer and transport enthusiast Thomas Wheeler said, “This is a short-distance suburban train, not one that long-distance passengers will want to use.”

Decarbonisation Deficit

Network Rail’s Traction Decarbonisation Network Strategy (TDNS) recommends widespread electrification and warns against buying diesel-only trains. This came too late for KeolisAmey, who planned for all trains outside the south-east Wales metro to be diesel-operated. Their fleet replacement pledge involved a large number of new diesel trains (the class 197s) with a lifespan stretching into the 2050s. This jeopardises the TDNS. Crucially, despite claims they could be converted to hydrogen, the new fleet would remain incapable of

operating on overhead power leaving TfW unable to benefit from electrification. To support decarbonisation, TfW would need trains capable of switching between diesel/hydrogen and the overhead electricity supply. Instead they have enough diesel-only class 197s on-order to make electrification unviable.

Kind regards,
Thomas J. Wheeler

For further information or to arrange a discussion with Pembrokeshire Friends Of the Earth please do not hesitate to contact me. Jeff Smith, chairman of the Shrewsbury to Aberystwyth Rail Passengers Association and Peter Kingsbury, chairman of Railfuture Wales have agreed to be interviewed regarding these issues.