

The format of this response roughly accords with the following points on which we sought our walker's views (see Appendix):-

1. The ethos and activities of Rail Rambles fit well within many of Welsh Assembly policy aims.
2. We encourage travel by train and, therefore, sustainable access to rural areas of mid and north Wales and the Marches.
3. Our walks showcase the benefits of train travel, even encouraging use at other times, and by other (normally car-based) walking groups.
4. Our walks explicitly seek to minimise the use of cars, except for rail-heading, and thus help reduce the impact that transport has on the environment.
5. As an 'open-to-anyone' organisation, we meet social inclusion goals amongst those able to walk in the countryside.
6. Our walks provide healthy exercise both for people of working and retirement ages, helping contribute to their personal physical and mental health and well-being.
7. At the end of our walks, we patronise local refreshment outlets helping local rural economies.
8. Without support, in the form of free travel passes from the future franchisee, Rail Rambles would cease to exist and all the above policy benefits would be lost.

1. What We Need from Transport for Wales

Notwithstanding our informal comments about new stations and improved frequencies, at the end of this response, we hope that this response will adequately demonstrate why Transport for Wales should recognise the policy benefits arising from our voluntary activities on behalf of a wide range of people, both socially and geographically.

We ask, therefore, that this recognition be communicated by TfW to the four bidders in the on-going franchising process not necessarily as something that could form part of the future contract but as something that could beneficially be included by the bidders as a demonstration of their commitment to supporting voluntary groups and especially those that provide policy benefits that accord with Welsh government objectives.

2. Encouraging Train Travel

All Rail Rambles start or finish at a railway station although sometimes there may be an onward and/or return journey by bus to access where we walk; for example, Llangollen by bus from Ruabon railway station. Some walks are linear with different starting and finishing points; in this way, we absolutely encourage travel by train. All our walks involve rail travel for all, or at least the majority of, the participants and every Rail Ramble generates ticket sales. Obviously, we cannot say that nobody uses cars because we recognise that many people need them to get to their nearest railway station that then gives them access to our walks.

Although we have no specific information, we are aware that the vast majority of our participants can drive and have access to a car but they choose to travel with us by train because the train journeys, especially the longer ones, are seen as an integral part of the Rail Ramble day out.

Interestingly, our statistics show that our average fare has been well over £7 per person for the past two years; this is significantly above the £4.25 average fare shown at the recent TfW consultation events. This illustrates how well we promote travel by train. Our average fare is derived almost totally from off-peak fares because mostly travel to walks is on less busy off-peak trains, therefore encouraging travel by train when there is generally spare capacity.

One response to our internal informal consultation referred to Rail Rambles continuing the tradition started by the railway companies as early as the 1930s (if not earlier) for walks from railway stations and continued by British Rail in the 1950s and 1960s. This also accords with the

more recent work done to establish a long-distance path and shorter walks from stations along the route of the Heart of Wales line - a service frequently used by Rail Rambles.

3. Showcasing the Benefits of Train Travel

As well as always just using the train, Rail Rambles demonstrates how well trains give access to all sorts of areas, some of which many people would never have thought of visiting. For us, one huge benefit of the Wales & Borders network is the myriad of places that can be accessed with some walks from the more remote stations hardly featuring any road walking at all - really getting away from it all.

Our internal informal consultation provoked comments such as *“because I have a senior railcard, which I purchased for the walks, I now use the train a lot more for other journeys for which I would have used the car”*. Other comments reveal that our Rail Ramblers encourage friends to travel by train for non-Rail Ramble outings such as other informal walks with friends or family and trips for shopping or social days out. All these are journeys that otherwise would have been made by car. Two other consultees said *“we are an excellent advertisement for travel by train”* and *“I cannot emphasise enough the quite remote and ‘unknown’ countryside and communities that the RRs present us with. Amazing places that we otherwise would never have known existed. Mid Wales, the Elenydd Hostels, Radnor Forest, Llanwrtyd Wells, etc. being prime examples. These ‘new’ places are then introduced to close family and friends, opening them up to a perhaps unrecognised wider audience with the revenue that brings.”*

We also spread the ‘use the train to go walking’ message inasmuch that our volunteer leaders often formally or informally lead other groups on train-based outings to gain access to countryside walks. As an example, Coventry branch of the Ramblers Association have a guest leader from Rail Rambles in mid-June, this year, leading a walk that comes from one of our past programmes (see <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1m5xhpFlsSROUW1vnYP7UIARHzKg4JkgI8dSbfHDZvE/edit?pref=2&pli=1#gid=1425725465>).

A further example is that another Rail Rambler is leading the walk in July from Broome to Craven Arms as part of the launch of the Knighton - Craven Arms section of the Heart of Wales Line Trail, an initiative supported by the current train operator. Coincidentally, the route is one of our regular Rail Rambles and we have been regularly showcasing travel by train for walking days out along this line at least since 1992 when we were in partnership with Regional Railways.

Plans are afoot this year to incorporate our programmed mid-September Wednesday walk into the week-long Wellington Walking Festival. This will enable us to raise the profile of Rail Rambles further and, therefore, showcase walking by train. Although we have no real evidence, we know that some of our leaders who walk with other groups often take the opportunity to advertise Rail Rambles especially since most car-based walking groups appear not to walk on Saturdays.

Our public transport only ethos, always involving travel by train, not only provides sustainable access to rural areas of mid and north Wales and the Marches, but also encourages travel by train. Furthermore, we frequently use railway stations that have very little use, for example - Llanbister Road and some other stations on the Heart of Wales line or stations that have clear seasonal variations, such as Tal-y-bont (north of Barmouth), whereas we walk and bring patronage to these quieter stations throughout the year.

4. Reducing the Impact that Transport has on the Environment

This rail-based (or public transport-based) only ethos matches the Welsh Assembly’s policy concerning the impact of transport on the countryside, as referred to by Ken Skates in his

introduction to the 2017 TfW consultation document - *"We also want a transport system [that] reduces the impact transport has on the environment"*.

This policy message is also stated in the following way:- *"We will also prioritise actions that influence the mode of travel chosen to make greater use of the more sustainable modes of transport; a focus on travel behaviour could enable a significant number of car trips to be replaced by walking, cycling or public transport."* (One Wales: Connecting the nation - The Wales Transport Strategy, page 7)

By using trains instead of cars, except for rail-heading, Rail Rambles do not pollute rural areas with car emissions and thus we help preserve the natural environments where we walk. This applies equally to urban areas from which some of our walks start, for example Aberystwyth, Barmouth, Machynlleth and Newtown, as well as remote rural areas such as those around the more isolated stations along the Cambrian and Heart of Wales lines.

One of our consultees said *"Use of public transport, sometimes bus as well as train, reduces private cars in sensitive rural areas and supports use of public transport to the benefit of rural communities. My Impression is that many people who take part in Rail Rambles may otherwise use public transport very little, and would undertake much less walking in Wales and the Marches"*.

5. Meeting Social Inclusion Goals

We have no membership requirements and do not charge anything for our walks. They are open to anyone who turns up at the relevant railway station. The only barrier would be if our leader(s) deemed the person not to be suitably dressed for that particular walk or to be obviously incapable of being able to complete the walk. This would be regrettable and may never have occurred but our leaders need to be able to do this for safety reasons - both for the particular person and/or the group as a whole. Thus Rail Rambles are totally socially-inclusive subject to the ability to walk in the countryside and, of course, to afford the rail fare.

We ask nothing about participants or their backgrounds but we do know, anecdotally, that they cover a broad range of socio-economic groups, either by current situation or by previous occupations. This includes factory workers and professionals, at least one architect, one lawyer and a GP doctor, and employees and people who own(ed) businesses. The only basis of our 'relationship' is our love of walking and use of trains.

We know that many of our participants would not go walking in the countryside except in a group led by 'professional' leaders. One consultee's comment sums this up, thus - *"because the walks are lead, it opens up the walks to persons who are not so competent at map reading and in turn makes more use of the network of paths"*.

As well as people who live within 'our area' (see map on first page), our regular walkers include people from elsewhere in England who spend weekends in 'our area' as well as occasional visitors from as far away, recently, as California and New Zealand.

6. Promoting Healthy Exercise

This is paramount for many of our walkers who recognise both the need for and the enjoyment of walking. Again, our activities match Welsh Assembly objectives as described in the introduction to the 2017 Consultation Document - *"We want to see a transport system that improves connectivity throughout Wales and that encourages active travel."* (Ken Skates' introduction) and the following statement in 'Taking Wales Forward, 2016 - 2021' - *"We will promote healthy lifestyles and choices through interventions on preventing ill health and encouraging more activity for general well-being throughout life"*.

Whilst Rail Rambles are not formally 'interventions on preventing ill health', we believe that our walks help people maintain or improve their well-being which keeps them, especially older people, healthier. One consultee said that Rail Rambles are *"a valuable service that contributes to my physical and mental well-being. Helping people to keep fit and active means that they are less of a burden on the NHS"*. Another said that Rail Rambles *"contributes to keeping the age group that generally requires most health care, from declining health"*.

Our activities possibly help others in a more specific way which might be summed up by the following comment - *"I want to emphasise both the physical and mental health benefits of walking in the sociable group which is Rail Ramblers, especially for single women who may not feel so confident about going out alone. I know of many supportive friendships which have been forged as a result of the contacts made"*.

The physical health benefits of walking may be rather obvious but another consultee made a rather poignant observation - *"Sometimes the mental benefits of being accepted by a group of friendly people who make no demands or judgements - no membership or conformity requirements - is overlooked. When my daughter lost her husband after a long illness it was so healing to just go out and walk with the group get lost in the beauty of the countryside and away from all the pain for a while"*.

A recent conversation revealed that one of our regular Rail Ramblers had quite a serious heart attack whilst out walking one weekend but didn't discover it until a visit to his GP and then A&E a few days later. After having four stents and a rest, his recovery was quick and he's walking again. His GP put his fast recovery down to his active lifestyle. Another conversation related to a lady's workplace routine health check at which she was told that her heart was of someone several years younger, again due to her active lifestyle.

Although we do not see ourselves as a component of formal preventive-health arrangements, unlike 'Walking for Health' activities, we are acutely aware of this valuable by-product of Rail Rambles that would be lost to individual people and the wider community if we ceased to exist.

7. Helping Local Rural Economies

At the end of our walks, we normally have some time to wait for the return train. This time is usually spent in a local tearoom or café or pub. There is one tearoom that, apparently, keeps an eye on our programme to know when to expect our walkers who are very partial to the tearoom's cakes. There is also at least one pub close to an isolated station that profits significantly from our Rail Rambles since we vastly outnumber the locals when we call.

We often use buses to extend the range of our walking area; examples include Ruabon to Llangollen (quite often) and onward travel from Machynlleth or Aberystwyth. Obviously those in possession of Welsh concessionary bus passes travel for free, but those under 60 and all English residents, irrespective of age, pay the full fare. This helps support rural bus services, either by enhancing the operator's profitability or by helping reduce the local authority's financial support, depending on the basis of the tendered service's contract. We appreciate the critical state of many rural bus services and some of our leaders specifically devise Wednesday walks that use buses to patronise marginal services as well as for deeper access into the countryside.

8. Rail Rambles Would Cease to Exist

Without support, in the form of free travel passes from the future franchisee, Rail Rambles would cease to exist and all the above policy benefits would be lost. The free passes enable our leaders

to find new walks, helping us produce varied bi-annual programmes, to assess programmed walks for safety and accessibility (*it is significant to note that rights-of-way marked on an OS map can sometimes not exist or may be obstructed or be unsafe*) as well as to lead the actual walks.

We know that our pool of experienced volunteer leaders, who are and must be members of the Ramblers Association for insurance purposes, would significantly decrease if this support did not continue. Many leaders do not wish to admit this formally but informal conversations indicate that there would be an increase in car use because of the accumulated cost of train fares for multiple visits which can sometimes be necessary. One consultee responded, quite simply, that *“without the rail passes, I couldn't afford to recce the routes”*. Another, relatively recent, leader said that he makes *“exceptional use of the rail pass for checking walks out and familiarizing myself with routes before the day of leading. I will commonly walk a route three times before the day of leading. Often on those days I will walk with a friend who will pay for their ticket. It would be impracticable for me to re-walk routes with this frequency without the rail pass.”* The latter part of his comment relates further to our promotion of travel by train.

Other Comments

We have specifically not addressed the questions in the TfW consultation because it would have been virtually impossible to have gained a consensus on many of the questions. Furthermore, we do not have the resources to convene meetings and, even if we did, we could not expect a representative cross-section of attendees given the vast area from which our walkers come.

We would however, informally and without the benefit of any proper consultation, wish to offer the following comments about the new franchise.

- (a) The variable stopping pattern on the Leominster - Craven Arms - Church Stretton section of the Cardiff to Shrewsbury line can make it difficult for some of our walkers to join Rail Rambles from these stations or to make timely connections at Shrewsbury for walks from stations on other lines. A clear pattern of stoppers and non-stoppers might work better for us as well as for other travellers or potential rail users.
- (b) Although we frequently use the Heart of Wales line, the infrequent service is a challenge. An additional train departing from Swansea two hours behind the current Saturday afternoon train (i.e. arriving at Shrewsbury in the early evening) would be very useful enabling us to extend walks from stations we already use and to provide Rail Rambles further south along this line, allowing us to walk in other parts of rural Wales and, perhaps, to extend opportunities for people living outside 'our area' to enjoy the benefits of our walks.
- (c) We would support any move to reopen stations on the Cambrian line, for example at Carno, Bow Street and Cemmaes Road, because it would allow us to offer a better variety of Rail Rambles along this line as well as possibly enabling other people to join our walks.
- (d) The transfer of the management of stations away from the dominant operator seems illogical as suggested for Chester, Shrewsbury and Hereford Stations. Our main interest is in Shrewsbury Station since this is the pivotal point for most of our Rail Ramble journeys, including being the station of origin for several of our walkers. The suggestion of a transfer to the London Midland operator would infer the introduction of a Birmingham-centric management approach which might not be in the best interests of people wanting to use Wales & Borders services or for potential passengers wanting to know more about travel opportunities from their local station.

APPENDIX

The TfW requirement to “*make it clear who the organisation represents and, where applicable, how the views of members were gathered*” has caused us a little conundrum because we do not have any members as will become apparent in the following paragraph.

Rail Rambles has always been a group of like-minded volunteers who wish to share the benefits of using trains to gain access to and walk in the countryside with as many people as possible. The organisational work is carried out by a small team of five ‘like-minded volunteers’ two of whom assemble the six-monthly programme, co-ordinating the availability of volunteer leaders with as varied a number of walks as possible; another one maintains the publically-accessible Rail Rambles website; another co-ordinates the ticket collections and reporting to the franchisee and organises the route records and distributes appropriate route maps to the leaders; and another looks after overall administration including liaison with the franchisee. They are all supported, from time-to-time, with other specific tasks and, of course, at all times by our volunteer leaders.

Our walkers are encouraged to give their e-mail addresses to our administrator for the purpose of receiving occasional up-dates about Rail Rambles and associated activities, such as alerts about infrastructure works that affect our walks, occasional meals together and short-stay walking breaks in places that are not easily accessible and/or impossible for ordinary one-day programmed walks. It is this list of e-mail addresses that has allowed us to consult with our ‘non-membership’.

Following attendance at the Shrewsbury Workshop, we circulated a one-page consultation briefing note to everyone on our e-mail address list and two of our volunteer leaders also forwarded this to relevant people in their ‘address books’. We believe that this methodology reached some 150, or maybe more, of those who walk with us. We put a notice on the front page of our website inviting anyone to comment on our consultation briefing note. We also made announcements at Rail Rambles during our internal consultation period to bring our participants’ attention to what we were doing; this was especially important in order to enable those without access to the internet to offer their views.

We received over 110 individual responses which may represent a 70% or thereabouts response rate which we believe to be extremely high for any consultation. This seems to suggest not only support for the basis of this formal response but how much these individuals value what Rail Rambles offers. One of these responses was from a resident of New Zealand who joined us for several walks whilst last visiting her family in Wales.

All the responses support the approach outlined in our consultation briefing note and many offered supportive anecdotes some of which have been used in this formal response.

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