

Ten years after Arriva Trains Wales took over are commuters better or worse off?

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Many passengers might argue that rail services should be better than they are after 10 years of Arriva Trains Wales, but experts say the main deficiencies are down to the 15-year franchise awarded by the UK Government in 2003, rather than Arriva's management.

Arriva's original bid for the franchise proposed new trains but, recalls Swansea-based transport consultant John Davies: "The franchise was let on the basis of no growth and no development except a £400,000 investment in car parks. The Department for Transport simply had no idea."

Since ATW ran its first services in December 2003, its punctuality score has improved from 80% to about 94% – making ATW one of Britain's most punctual train operators.

Contrary to the DfT's expectations and in spite of the economic downturn, passenger journeys made on ATW services have increased by 60%. The Welsh Government stepped in to fund some additional trains, but ATW is carrying the additional passengers with basically the same fleet as in 2003.

Mike Bagshaw, ATW's commercial director, says: "That's been down to a lot of hard work,

particularly on our fleet. We've invested in the fleet – putting more reliable parts in the trains.” More reliable trains spend less time in depots and more time providing seats for passengers.

ATW also improved productivity by refining how trains and staff were scheduled, especially in 2005 when it introduced timetables which repeated each half-hour, hour or two hours. That initiative built on the political decision to create a single Wales and Borders franchise, where previously the railways of North and Mid Wales were managed from Manchester and Birmingham respectively.

Mr Davies says, who was British Rail's manager for Wales in the 1980s and early 1990s, says: “I had some doubts when the franchise started, but I think Arriva is doing a fine job now. In the first year I thought ‘This is terrible’, but it's very difficult taking over a franchise, and Arriva had to put together what had been three franchises before. They had the double whammy of a no-growth franchise and melding three different customer and staff cultures together.

“Arriva did that well. There wasn't very much industrial relations trouble at that time.”

He admires the way ATW managers squeezed more and more from their rolling stock, not only to accommodate the growth in passengers but to extend the Cardiff-Gloucester service to Cheltenham for connections with trains to northern England and Scotland.

Some people occasionally shout about overcrowding or punctuality, he says, but ATW succeeds by being “boringly normal”.

“If you do well day in, day out, nobody notices but deep down they're fairly happy. I've noticed less criticism of Arriva in recent years.”

John Rogers, chairman of passenger campaign group Railfuture South Wales, says: “I think Arriva have done a reasonable job, given the terms of reference at the beginning and the type of rolling stock they have. Just about every train has somebody walking up and down collecting rubbish.”

However, he is concerned at increasing station car parking charges, and adds: “There's a lot of dissatisfaction over fare levels. It's quite tough unless you've got a railcard.”

Mr Davies said staff attitudes had improved under ATW. “Swansea station was one of the worst for customer service. It was a male preserve and they were usually hard union people there. The customer was somebody to be tolerated.

“They're much more friendly now. The investment in the new station facilities has helped, but there's been a culture change there and in Cardiff.”

Mr Davies says ATW's local managers do not engage enough with the wider area. “The station managers have far too large areas to cover. The guy at Swansea also covers Carmarthen, half of the Heart of Wales line [which goes to Shrewsbury] and the whole of

West Wales.

“Swansea should have its own station manager who is engaged in the life of Swansea as well as the railway. There should be more responsive local managers who are engaged with their business and tourism community.”

Although ATW was not contractually obliged to invest, with such a long franchise and a growing market it could have spent money on improvements which would have paid for themselves, argues Mr Rogers. ATW instead left the Welsh Government to fund the £7.5m refurbishment of the trains used on the Aberystwyth line.

Mr Bagshaw responds that ATW has invested £30m so far. Some of the new equipment is visible to passengers, such as ticket machines and ticket gates at stations. The rest is behind the scenes, including more reliable components on trains, staff welfare facilities, simulators for staff training and a new train depot in Machynlleth.

He says ATW will continue to invest over the franchise’s last five years, such as by contributing towards station improvement schemes. That period will also see major improvements by Network Rail, including new signalling in many areas and electrification in the south.

‘Our task is to keep the services going but making sure that we’re working with our partners to ensure that we fully exploit these major investments,’ says Mr Bagshaw.

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