

Tfw - Autumn Season

James Williams [00:00:16] Hello and welcome to this first Transport for Wales podcast. I'm your host James Williams and this podcast is a chance to discuss the hot topics in transport around Wales. I'd like to welcome my guests.

Colin Lee [00:00:27] So I'm Colin Lee, I'm the customer experience director for Transport for Wales.

Alexia Course [00:00:31] I'm Alexia Course, I'm the real operations director at Transport for Wales.

Daniel Booth [00:00:36] And I'm Daniel Booth, I'm this season's delivery specialist for Network Rail for the Wales Route.

James Williams [00:00:40] Today we will talk about the autumn season which is a challenging time for the industry. We learn about these challenges and also about what the industry in Wales is doing to prepare for it.

James Williams [00:00:49] Alexia perhaps to start we can recap the events of last autumn.

Alexia Course [00:00:52] So last, last autumn when we... Transport for Wales just took over the franchise. Last year we had a lot of our fleets were really affected by what we called Wheel flats which was a direct result of the adhesion problems on the rails. I mean it took a lot of trains out of service which meant our passengers were really really affected. It meant that we had to move to more sort of bus replacement and we had some what we call didn't have as many carriages. So we've learnt a lot of lessons from last autumn. We did a couple of independent reports both ourselves and Network Rail commissioned some independent reports which identified a load of recommendations and we have acted on all of those recommendations over the last twelve months so that we are much more prepared for the autumn season that we're coming into now both as ourselves with our colleagues in in in the rail side of of delivery of the service and also with Network Rail colleagues as well.

Colin Lee [00:01:44] Yeah I think it might just be worth explaining what we mean by wheel flats as well so and see rail wheels are a metal and they need to stay as close to perfectly round as possible when we have braking issues or we slip due to this time of year and that can create little flat spots in that circle. And if you imagine that then that circle is just going round and round and round on the track each time it gets to a flat spot. It makes a bang and you might have heard that when you're on the train and when that's starting to happen that's not that's not dangerous at all but it will start to damage the track and in time it needs to be fixed. Last year what happened is alexia said is we needed to take a lot of trains out of service to fix those flats so we put them on this special machine called the lathe which basically takes off small amounts of metal off the wheel to get it back to perfectly round.

James Williams [00:02:39] Alexia, Could you tell us a little bit more about the preparation work transport for Wales have done?

Alexia Course [00:02:44] So we have completely overhauled for the first time in 35 years. Our wheel lathe at canton depot that is a sizeable piece of kit that turns the wheels on on the trains and keeps the connection points how they need to be between between the

wheels on the trains and the tracks. So that's the first time it's ever been overhauled in its 35 year life. So that's been a big investment and a big commitment from there from the fleet teams. We've also fitted what we call wheel slide protection on our worst affected train units from last year and this is all part of our overall kind of circa 40 million pound investment in the interim fleet as transport for Wales that we're investing in. In addition we've also put auto sanding equipment on a number of our trains as well so that when we reach adhesion hotspots that the sand is automatically kind of dropped onto the rails to help with braking and stopping distances and that sort of thing. So there's an awful lot of work that the teams have put in to be better prepared for this autumn.

James Williams [00:03:49] Thanks for that Alexia, Dan what preparation work have network rail being carrying out?

Daniel Booth [00:03:53] So network rail have been doing a significant amount of vegetation management, doubled over the last five years. So that's sort of trying to remove the volume of leaves that are lying side part of the mitigations in addition to that we've also doubled rail treatment. We have a number of specialist trains which run around the route six days a week between 18 and 21 hours in duration and they are predominantly tasked with trying to remove leaf contamination from the railhead in order to improve conditions. So that's doubled since 2016. So we are doing more and more with regards to line side mitigations as well we have other units that we've sort of identified through our independent reviews that have become obsolete so potential reliability issues so we've upgraded all of those for this season as well.

James Williams [00:04:42] So we've spoken about the physical rail equipment. How about preparations for the customer?

Colin Lee [00:04:47] So what we are then doing for customers as well is we've put in delay repay 15 which means if you were delayed by 15 minutes or more then you get compensation that's very easy to do. There's an app based and web based form and most of that we pay within 48 hours. It's very quick to come back but obviously we want to try and get the service right first time and we don't want to see those delays. We're cautiously optimistic this year we've done an awful lot of work with our partners in network. Rail and Transport for Wales to ensure we are much better prepared than last year. We'd only just taken over last year. So it was it was difficult. And we don't want to see a repeat of that. We've done a lot of work and we're cautiously optimistic.

James Williams [00:05:27] And on that point working in the industry myself I understand the hard work and dedication shown by staff during this period.

Colin Lee [00:05:33] Yes are staff incredibly dedicated. Y'know they work through the day and also through the night on this. We're doing everything we can to be as prepared as possible. We've got additional staff on standby. Extra lathe operators extra lathe engineers in case there's any issue with that specialist piece of kit and on our staff on board are always doing their absolute best by the customers. If we do get delayed trains we've got things like water on board that we can we can give around and we will always make sure the compensation is as easy as possible to claim and ultimately we've got a social media team that are brilliant and pleased and fully bilingual we've doubled the number of people in social media and a great team now that can give you quick within usually 10 minutes advice on social media as well.

James Williams [00:06:19] So the main topic of conversation today has been Autumn and we've discussed the work being done. But surely climate change has to be part of the conversation?

Daniel Booth [00:06:28] Yeah. So we've seen over the last four or five years that there's been a lot more extreme weather events. So I'm pretty sure everybody will remember beast from the east for the for the winter snow. You know we've sort of seen levels like that for for for many a year. So we are sort of we are sort of seeing a shift in the weather patterns. So storms during the season may become more frequent in which case you know we will we will have to manage those accordingly. And when they do when they do come that is on top of adhesion.

Alexia Course [00:06:59] It's fair to say as well so yeah when we only just took over the franchise we had storm Callum that those first sort of week or so in and obviously that that was that was a big challenge for everyone involved in delivering the service for customers. In addition to that just picking up on the sort of the Network Rail point as well. I know net rail have done a sterling job with the Conwy Valley line as well that was sort decimated by flooding a few months ago and they brought back that's that line into use but that was supposedly meant to be a once in a sort of 15 year event and it's happened twice in sort of less than five years. So we are starting to see more of these these climate change related events happening and we as an industry and we're working very closely with Network Rail. So Autumn for example it's very much a a joint plan it's joint recommendations it's a joint task force to have all all these actions and mitigations in place to deal with whatever the the season throws at us really.

Daniel Booth [00:08:00] I think I think yeah I think as organisations we understand that neither one can solve the problem we have to work together in order to deliver for the passengers.

James Williams [00:08:10] Maybe to finish off the discussion today we could go around the table and you could all send a message out to customers and to our listeners.

Colin Lee [00:08:16] Yeah as we say we're cautiously optimistic we think we will be able to provide a decent service this autumn and please do plan ahead have a look online before you travel and we've got a good website with journey check alerts and our Twitter team are always on hand. So we've got the ability to let you know if things have slightly gone wrong and to replan and really if you can leave a bit of extra time for your journey in case of delays. But we are cautiously optimistic it will be a lot better than last year.

Alexia Course [00:08:48] Yeah I think just in support of Colin, we as an industry have have invested a lot more we've put a lot of time and effort and energy into getting our plans as prepared and as robust as they possibly can be. We never know what Mother Nature is going to throw at us. So we are we are conscious of that and mindful of that and Autumn is always going to be a difficult season just for the rail industry in general but we've done an awful lot. I think the other thing to add as well just for for customers and passengers is that should we encounter those delays we've put a lot more contingency plans in place as well around how we work effectively between ourselves and Network Rail to manage incidents when they happen but also in terms of any sort working really closely with our bus partners as well so that we've got better contingency arrangements if we do unfortunately have to have to bring in rail replacement services as well. But obviously that's not that's not the service we want to offer our customers we want to keep people moving on our trains and that's what we're fully committed to doing.

Daniel Booth [00:09:49] Yeah. So Autumn is a challenging season. We are very experienced staff and people in place and we are working very collaboratively with TFW to make sure that everything is prepared and we keep passengers moving this season. So it will be a challenge but we are up for it.

James Williams [00:10:08] That's all we have time for today. A big thank you to all my guests. If you'd like further information or to suggest a topic for discussion. Please contact us at our website through social media or email contact@tfw.wales. Thank you very much for listening. Goodbye.