

'Environmental disaster averted' as railway reopens at site of diesel freight derailment

March 8, 2021



The railway through Llangennech has reopened for the first time in six months, following one of the biggest environmental recovery efforts Network Rail has ever been involved with.

The southern end of the Heart of Wales line, which runs from Shrewsbury to Swansea, has been closed since August 2020, after a freight train, pulling 25 wagons, derailed while passing the small, Carmarthenshire village. The devastation to follow saw the train wagons catching fire before around 350,000 litres of diesel spilled into the ground, causing major concern for the surrounding wildlife conservation area and waterways.

Since then, ground teams from Network Rail, Natural Resources Wales, Adler and Allan and partner agencies have put in a total 37,500 hours of work to protect the local environment, remove the huge wagons from the site and repair a large stretch of damaged railway.

30,000 tonnes of contaminated soil have been excavated from 150 metres of railway, at a depth of two metres and width of 20 metres. That soil has been replaced with new, clean material from quarries in Carmarthenshire and Pembrokeshire, with the fuel-soaked soil taken to a licensed waste management

facility in Merthyr.

In the final few weeks of the recovery, Network Rail worked to fit around 530 metres of brand-new track before reinstalling the signalling, damaged in the fire.

Freight services started back on the railway line through Llangennech late on Friday 5 March, with passenger services starting up again on Monday 8 March, although Transport for Wales is currently operating a reduced timetable, due to Covid.

Bill Kelly, Network Rail Wales route director, said: "I am delighted that we have reached the final stages of our work to reinstate the railway following one of the biggest environmental recovery operations Network Rail has ever been involved with.

"It is thanks to our quick-thinking frontline teams, along with our partner agencies, that the fuel spill was able to be contained so swiftly, allowing us to prevent what could have been a total environmental disaster.

"Our teams have worked non-stop for the past six months and their dedication has paid off.

"We can confidently say the measures we have taken will protect the local environment for generations to come."

Natural Resources Wales, who compared the scale of the incident to the Sea Empress disaster, of 1996, will continue to monitor the shellfish and wider environment over the coming months.

Martyn Evans, Chair of the Recovery Coordination Group, Natural Resources Wales, said: "The re-opening of the railway line at Llangennech is a huge milestone in what has been a complex, challenging and ultimately successful recovery operation at a location of international environmental significance, coordinated by Natural Resources Wales.

"A wide range of partners have shown brilliant teamwork in working together to overcome many challenges and reduce these impacts through a Recovery Coordination and Tactical Group operating within the framework of the Dyfed Powys Local Resilience Forum.

"There have been far-reaching impacts on the environment – on land and in the sea, the community of Llangennech, local businesses, particularly the shellfisheries, tourism and industry. Happily, most of these impacts have now been overcome and activities restored, although our work and support for some of these groups is on-going."

Alexia Course, Transport Operations Director at Transport for Wales, said: "The reopening of the railway line through Llangennech is fantastic news for the local community and we look forward to welcoming passengers back onto TfW services.

"It has taken a tremendous amount of work from all involved and is an example of the strong collaboration between TfW, Network Rail and a wide range of partner agencies.

“While we are pleased to mark this important milestone, passengers are reminded public transport is currently open for essential travel only and a reduced COVID-19 timetable is in place across the network.

“Further improvement work is also taking place on the northern section of the Heart of Wales line and passengers are advised to check before travelling as rail replacement services are in operation from Llanwrtyd Wells running north from 6 March 2021.”

Lee Waters MS, Llanelli, said: “When we first visited the site after the derailment it was like a disaster movie but each time I have revisited since, it has been clear to see the amount of effort that has gone into saving the environment and reinstating the railway.

“I have been very pleased with the constant stream of communication Network Rail has delivered to everyone in the local community, over the past six months.

“It is great to have this railway line back up and running again for passengers as we prepare to reopen the economy in time for Easter and Summer.”

Nia Griffith MP, Llanelli, said: “It has been really impressive to see the way in which the agencies have worked together to undertake the enormous task of clearing the wreckage, taking away tonnes and tonnes of contaminated soil, doing restoration work and building up the railway from deep foundations to the state-of-the-art track and junction, that I have just been privileged to see.

“I would like to say a huge thank you to all involved for being out in all weathers throughout the winter months to get this work done. When we come out of lockdown, I very much look forward to travelling along the line again.”

David Edwards, Chair of the Heart of Wales Line Development Co Ltd, said: “We are delighted that our much-loved rural railway will once again be open. When the current travel restrictions are lifted, we are sure that many people will enjoy a trip on the line, will visit the charming rural communities that it serves, and will take the opportunity to explore the Heart of Wales Line Walking Trail.

“To enable the reopening to occur, a huge amount of engineering and other specialist work has been carried out by Network Rail and others, and we pay tribute to their efforts, often in challenging weather conditions.”

The ongoing investigation into the cause of the freight train derailment is being led by the Rail Accident Investigation Branch.



Photo and video credit: Network Rail/ First pic: Mighty High Aerials