

Heart of Wessex Rail Partnership Update (Executive Decision)

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Purpose of the Report

To receive a summary of the work undertaken by the Heart of Wessex Rail Partnership during 2015/16. To consider making a partnership contribution for 2016/17.

Public Interest

Yeovil Pen Mill is on the Bristol/Weymouth line. The Partnership actively supports community involvement in improving the stations and encouraging local communities and visitors to utilise the line for a wide range of trips and journeys. The Partnership is resourced by contributions from local authorities, match funded by the rail operator Great Western Railway and a large group of volunteers who offer their time and expertise.

Recommendations

That members:

- 1) Note the work undertaken by the Partnership in 2015/16 and that a similar report has been taken to Area East Committee
- 2) Approve a funding contribution of £1,000 from Transport Scheme Grants Budget for 2016/17

Background

Accountability and financial support for the Heart of Wessex Rail Partnership is shared between Area East Committee (2 stations along the line) and Area South Committee (one station).

The line has been supported by a partnership of local authorities along the route since 1998 but was revised and expanded in 2003, with an action plan to:

- 1) Widen the Partnership to include local communities and to improve the understanding of and response to local needs along the line
- 2) Improve quality and availability of information promoting the line and its destinations and raise the profile of the service as an alternative to the private car
- 3) Improve station environments & facilities and access to them by other modes of travel

In the last 13 years the Partnership has developed its community arm with significant station investment, improvements to access, promotion and better information from local community groups along the line, including a large number of regular volunteers. The community representatives have their own working group, meeting three times per year with the train operator and Network Rail.

In October 2011 the line received designation as a community rail service in recognition of its strong support from partner authorities and communities themselves. This gives greater freedom to the operator and community in running the service and stations. The national objectives for community rail development are to increase revenue, manage down costs and encourage greater community involvement in the local railway.

Activities and Results of the Partnership's work

The following headlines are mainly drawn from the 2015/16 Annual Partnership report (Appendix 1):

- In the year to March 2016, for the first time since 2003, annual passenger journeys on the line contracted from 2,047,000 to March 2015 to 1,957,900 to March 2016 (4.4% down). Total Severn & Solent journeys of 14,271,200 in the year to March 2015 reduced to 13,655,500 to March 2016 (4.2% down).
- The reduction in passenger journeys is mainly attributable to the Temporary Period of Disruption relating to the major programme of electrification for parts of the Great Western network. July to September 2015 saw 87,000 fewer journeys on the Heart of Wessex Line than in the previous year.
- It is worth noting there may be some capacity constraints to continued future growth at the exceptional levels achieved between 2003 and 2014.
- For the first time in several decades some additional services were introduced to the Heart of Wessex line in 2015/16. Most notably summer Sunday services to Weymouth were extended to run from Easter Sunday to the end of October and will run all year in 2017.
- SWT introduced four services (1 southbound and 3 northbound) to a section of the line from December 2015, which do help to reduce some later afternoon/early evening gaps for Somerset stations.
- The Bruton and Castle Cary gardens continue to be tended & enhanced by the volunteers. At Castle Cary the community continue to maintain the walking route to town, including laying gravel to improve drainage under the kissing gate, replacing way marking discus and keeping the vegetation cut back.
- A banner for Yeovil Pen Mill, created for the Community Rail Conference in March, has been designed to last a few seasons. A high quality renovation of the whole station was undertaken during February by the GWR team and new "barrel train" planters (made from old whisky casks & also painted up in the new GWR colours) were installed.
- Joint Task Forces, where volunteers from stations along the line tackle larger projects, took place at Yeovil Pen Mill between April and September 2015. In April 2015 Yeovil in Bloom trained Friends to sow Meadow Mix with lovely results through summer 2015.
- A new project to adopt the station frontage was begun in February 2016 with Lufton College students taking on litter picking, planting and maintenance of "their" train and sowing of new meadow mix for spring.
- GWR's Community Rail Conference selected Yeovil as the first destination for the its new approach, which will circulate between the regions covered by the company's 5 Community Rail Partnerships.
- The Partnership produces the Bristol to Weymouth line guide 3 times a year in editions of just over 35,000 each, distributed through council & community offices, TICs, shops, pubs and volunteers across the GWR station network. 2015/16 editions focused on events, shopping and days out. The next edition is out in Sept 2016.
- Direct community involvement in the line includes 118 volunteers who gift over 13,000 hours of their time to enhancing stations, helping to improve customer information and promoting use of the line to the benefit of their local economies.

Looking Forward

For 2016/17 the Partnership chairmanship has passed from Wiltshire to Somerset. This is a welcome development in view of the overriding priority to seek increased services on the line. The long term objective remains to achieve an hourly service.

The following funding bids have been submitted:

- The Partnership is seeking £6,000 from GWR to install running in boards at Yeovil Pen Mill and Castle Cary stations
- A request has been made to GWR to explore the feasibility of south side passenger access at Bruton railway station. This will proceed this autumn and we hope will result in a costed proposal

Funding Support

The annual running cost of the Partnership in 2015/16 was in the region of £69,000. This covers: the salary of the Rail Partnership Officer; the printing and promotion of the line guide; upgrades to the Partnership website and a local grants scheme of £10,000 pa to enable the Partnership to match fund local community-led station initiatives. There is a formal Partnership Agreement through which the Unitary/County Authorities with responsibility for Local Transport Plans put in the greatest contribution and participating Districts a lesser amount. The biggest annual funding contributor is Great Western Railway at £26,250 although they are not signatories to the partnership agreement. The total funding expected in 2016/17 is £71,000 including some funding for small projects made available by GWR to enable some additional implementation of minor station improvements.

Despite some difficulties in securing all partnership contributions last year and the continuing budgetary pressure there is strong commitment from Partners and the train operating company to continue its work.

Financial Implications

There is £14,404 unallocated in the Transport Scheme Grants Budget. Under the terms of the Partnership Agreement it is requested that a sum of £1,000 is awarded as a partnership contribution by the Committee for this financial year. If approved, a sum of £13,404 will remain unallocated.

Corporate Priority Implications

4. Ensure safe, sustainable and cohesive communities

Carbon Emissions and Climate Change Implications

Maximising train travel reduces car journeys and congestion and therefore has a beneficial effect on carbon emissions.

Equality and Diversity Implications

A local train service provides these towns with an alternative to car travel for people without their own independent transport. The Partnership has produced its line guide in large format type for easy reading and this is replicated on its website. The train stations themselves have limited access for those with mobility problems on certain platforms.

Background papers

SSDC Partnership Review April 2011, Report to AEC July 2011; Report to AEC December 2011; Report to ASC July 2012; Report to AEC May 2013; Report to ASC October 2013; Report to AEC August 2014; Report to ASC October 2014; Report to AEC August 2015; Report to ASC October 2015; Report to AEC August 2015.