

## **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 2014/15. To consider making a partnership contribution for 2015/16.

### **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 and a large group of volunteers who offer their time and expertise.

### **Recommendations**

That members:

- 1) Note the work undertaken by the Partnership in 2014/15 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 2015/16

### **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 12 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 drawn from the 2014/15 Annual Partnership report:

### Train Passenger Numbers

- Between April 2014 and March 2015 passenger journeys grew by 140,000 to 2,046,000. For the first time in 12 years growth did not outstrip that for the region as a whole (6% versus average 7% for total Severn & Solent)
- Service levels remain unchanged meaning that for every 100 passenger journeys made in the years to 1<sup>st</sup> April 2003, there were 290 on the same trains in the year to 1<sup>st</sup> April 2015
- Of the 2 principal regional services between Bristol/Bath and the south coasts via Westbury: in 2003 Heart of Wessex carried 9% of the 7.3m passenger journeys – in 2015 it carried 15% of the 15.8m total
- Heart of Wessex line annual journeys have overtaken those of Bristol to Exeter to make it the 2<sup>nd</sup> service behind Cardiff/Portsmouth Harbour in passenger volume for the Severn & Solent region
- The Local Transport Plan for Somerset has a focus on increasing community participation in public transport and the Heart of Wessex Rail Partnership features as an example of good practice. Collaborations of this kind can be very cost effective ways of improving rural accessibility to services and facilities and boost in visitor numbers

### Promotion, Awareness Raising & Customer Experience

- A major project has been a complete redesign of the Heart of Wessex website: [www.heartofwessex.org.uk](http://www.heartofwessex.org.uk) with entirely new, extensively researched, content
- The Partnership produces the Bristol to Weymouth line guide 3 times a year in editions of just over 30,000 each, providing a detailed guide of the services available and focusing on fresh ideas for visiting destinations along the route. Included in the main features for 2014/15 was the arrival of the Ninesprings Café in Yeovil Country Park
- Custom designed maps were produced in answer to very specific needs (eg: directions to Hauser & Wirth from Bruton station and route into the town from Yeovil Pen Mill station) not already addressed by any existing resources
- "Fixing the Link" is focused on making it easier for people to find their way from/to stations – an above average passenger growth has brought a steady increase in customers new to the line

### Work with Volunteers and Community Engagement

- The Community Rail Working Party (CRWP) began with 6 people in 2003 and had its 11<sup>th</sup> Anniversary in October 2014 with 26 representatives
- The Community Rail Task Force – volunteers come together to help with larger projects one of which was the successful Meadow Mix garden at Yeovil Pen Mill. The Yeovil in Bloom team kindly offered a training day on this and a Task Force of volunteers from Dorset, Somerset, Wiltshire & Bristol carried out a project along the station frontage in the Spring

- The station is currently undergoing a complete repainting programme and a new Community Rail poster is being prepared to promote the partnership's work and to encourage more interest in its activities
- Work has been done with the Area South Team and Yeovil Town Team to put a stronger focus on Yeovil as a destination online and in print and Yeovil features strongly in the new Line Guide for the Autumn and Christmas shopping period
- The partnership continues to support and promote the 68 Bus Service and coordinates initiatives with both train companies to assist with this
- Community Projects Grant Fund – 15% of the Rail Partnership's budget is set aside each year for projects initiated by voluntary/community groups
- Voluntary contributions to the line and its stations are substantial – 120 people contribute over 13,000 hours of their time

## **Services on the Line**

First Great Western (being relaunched in September as Great Western Railway) now has a franchise extension to 2020. It has set aside a sum of money in the form of a Customer and Communities Improvement Fund (CCIF) to deliver projects that will benefit communities in areas of need. The fund is spread over three years with £750,000 available each year from April 2016 across the whole franchise area. A request has been submitted by SSDC towards improvement to connectivity via sustainable transport for Yeovil's expansion on its Eastern side

The Partnership has asked for improvements to the Sunday service as a priority for the line as a first step towards the desired hourly service. FGW have agreed to investigate the cost and logistics of this improvement.

## **Other Service Developments**

This area sits on the boundary of 2 separate franchises with little integration between the West of England Line and Heart Of Wessex Line. Recent flooding incidents have shone a spotlight on the importance of improving resilience, should a service be suspended alternative routes are available. This, coupled with a focus by the train operating companies on retaining franchises has created opportunities to improve connectivity across franchise areas.

South West Trains who operate the West of England Line (Waterloo-Exeter Service) have, over the last 9 months been in dialogue with the Partnership, local authorities, community groups and rail users about running some improved services on their own and the Heart of Wessex line to better utilise available capacity. These have now been approved by the rail regulator and will commence 14<sup>th</sup> December 2015.

Relevant enhancements are:-

- 10 trains a day connecting Yeovil Junction with Yeovil Pen Mill. Pen Mill will have 6 direct trains from, and 2 direct trains to, London Waterloo.
- Half hourly train services from London to Tisbury, Gillingham, Templecombe Sherborne and Yeovil Junction between 15.20 and 19.20.
- 3 extra evening services offered by SWT between Yeovil Pen Mill and Westbury in the evening

The LEP does not fund Rail Partnerships, but bids for significant capital improvements can be made via its Local Transport Board using new Growth Deal formats supplemented with

additional transport information . Earlier in the year FGW submitted a commercial led bid for improved parking and transport hub at Castle Cary station. A Local authority led Expression of Interest has been submitted in the last few weeks for the Lyde Road area to improve connectivity via sustainable transport for Yeovil's expansion on its Eastern side. More details are available from the Economic Development Team.

## **Funding Support**

The annual running cost of the Partnership in 2014/15 was in the region of £70,000. 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 First Great Western at £26,250 although they are not signatories to the partnership agreement. The total funding expected in 2015/16 is £66,000 including some funding for small projects made available by FGW 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 £18,179 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 £17,179 will remain unallocated

## **Corporate Priority Implications**

4. Ensure safe, sustainable & cohesive communities

## **Carbon Emissions & 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;