

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

The Area has 2 stations on the line at Bruton and Castle Cary. 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 will be taken to Area South Committee
- 2) Approve a funding contribution of £2,000 from the Members' discretionary 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:

- 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 1st April 2003, there were 290 on the same trains in the year to 1st 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 2nd 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
- A major project has been a complete redesign of the Heart of Wessex website: 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 a major international arts centre in Bruton
- 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. A new series of directional signs to the walking route to town from the station and a new poster board in Castle Cary welcomes visitors with a map of the route
- A complete resigning scheme at Bruton station included replacement station signs, a new “Welcome to Bruton” sign and a special “Running in board” at the northern limit of the station alerting arriving customers early that they were arriving in Bruton
- The Community Rail Working Party (CRWP) began with 6 people in 2003 and had its 11th Anniversary in October 2014 with 26 representatives
- The Partnership contributed to the “Stepping into Bruton” guide produced by the Bruton Chamber from its community grant fund and has helped to promote it
- 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 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.

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.

In Castle Cary a project is being considered to enhance parking at the station linked to a better bus interchange, with much of this investment being sought from the LEP. In Bruton there is the possibility of looking again at community access to the south side platform but any progress on this is reliant on support from Kings School.

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 First Great Western 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 £8,360 unallocated in the Members' discretionary budget for 2015/16. Under the terms of the Partnership Agreement it is requested that a sum of £2,000 is awarded as a partnership contribution by the Committee for this financial year. If approved a sum of £6,360 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 AEC May 2013; Report to AEC August 2014.
