

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 2013/14. To consider making a partnership contribution for 2014/15.

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 2013/14 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 2014/15

Background

Accountability and financial support for the Heart of Wessex Rail Partnership 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 10 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 now have their own working group, which meets quarterly 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 2013/14 Annual Partnership report:

- Passenger journeys grew 5% in 2011-12 to 1,718,000, a further 5.6% in 2012-13 and grew 6.5% in 12 months to date to 1,924,100. The growth on the line continues to outstrip the average for lines in its region (Severn and Solent)
- Service levels remain the same as in 2003 (when passenger journeys were 707,500) meaning that:
 - For every 100 passenger journeys made in the year to 1 April 2003, there were 272 on the same trains in the year to 1 April 2014
 - The line's 'share' of all annual passenger journeys in the Severn Solent region has hence gone up from 9.8% to 14.9%
- 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
- The Heart of Wessex Rail Partnership has an excellent website: www.heartofwessex.org.uk which is very well used by the travelling public
- 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. The 2013 - 10th Anniversary – edition featured Top Ten things to do along the line, generating some of the largest feedback ever received. The autumn 2013 edition featured Castle Cary open for business to support the town during the bridge closure. Most recently it has featured Bruton and the opening of the Hauser Wirth Gallery
- "Fixing the Link" emerged as a primary theme in 2013. A small print run of Connecting Up guides were produced, which show walking routes, current key bus connections and general local facilities - for use by station staff, train crews and volunteers
- The Community Rail Working Party (CRWP) began with 6 people in 2003 and held its 10th Anniversary meeting in October 2013 with 24 lead representatives from local communities & voluntary groups
- The Community Projects Grant Fund also celebrated its 10th year with 15% of the rail partnership's budget set aside each year for projects initiated by voluntary/community groups
- In 12 months 13,570 hours of voluntary work has been invested in the line

Services on the Line

A key issue for the Partnership is the extension of the FGW (First Great Western) franchise for a temporary period pending a full retendering exercise. Growth in use of the line has been achieved without any increase in services. The Partnership submitted a business case for an improved service submitted to the DfT for inclusion in the new franchise originally due to start in 2013. The franchise process was delayed and work continues to ensure that the priced option for an enhanced Bristol and Weymouth service will continue to feature in the next Invitation to Tender for the region's services. This was due to occur in 2016 however, DfT has been consulting on extending the FGW franchise to 2020. The Partnership and

SSDC have made representations on this proposal stressing the continued need to respond to overcrowding.

The Partnership has commissioned work into the demand for services/potential demand if more programming was enabled on the line. Whilst in the short-term there is a very low likelihood of additional services being provided, the Partnership is taking a long-term view and seeking to ensure that all opportunities are taken with the re-franchising exercise to protect existing services and, if possible, secure better services in the future.

Funding Support

The annual running cost of the Partnership is in the region of £60,000. 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 2014/15 is £59,512. An additional pot of funding for small projects is being made available by First Great Western to enable some additional implementation of station improvements.

The first project using this additional funding was a complete renewal of all station signing at Bruton, replacing existing signs and adding large free standing boards welcoming customers to Bruton. The brand new "Running In Board" for the extreme northern end of the southbound platform had, in particular, been on the community wish list for some time to give visitors from Bristol & Bath a clear early sign that the train was pulling in to Bruton station. This was completed in time for the opening of Hauser & Wirth on 15th July, together with a special focus on the gardens by the Friends and a complete steam cleaning of shelters and footbridge.

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

Financial Implications

There is £10,082 unallocated in the Members' discretionary budget for 2014/15. 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 £8,082 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;
