

Heart of Wessex Rail Partnership (Executive Decision)

Director: Martin Woods
Communities Lead: Helen Rutter
Lead Officer: Helen Rutter, Communities Lead
Contact Details: helen.rutter@southsomerset.gov.uk or (01963) 435012

Purpose of the Report

To receive a summary of the work undertaken by the Heart of Wessex Rail Partnership during 2017/18. To consider making a partnership contribution for 2018/19.

Public Interest

Castle Cary and Bruton are both 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 service issues that have affected the line
- 2) Note the work undertaken by the Partnership in 2017/18 and that a similar report is being taken to Area South Committee
- 3) Approve a funding contribution of £2,000 from the Members' Discretionary budget for 2018/19

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 15 years the Partnership has developed its community arm achieving significant station investment, improvements to access, promotion and better information from local community groups along the line, including a large number of regular volunteers. Community Working Parties with the TOC and Network Rail are organised by the Partnership, to discuss and prioritise community aspirations.

In October 2011 the line was designated 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.

Summary of Line performance 2017/18

I reported last year that passenger growth on the line had slowed dramatically in 2016/17 and that there was a rising and unacceptable level of service disruption linked to electrification work elsewhere in the Region, which was likely to be a factor in this slow down, along with the limiting factors caused by the infrequent service provided and short trains.

This service disruption was a matter of great concern and was taken up with GWR, by the Chairman of the Partnership, in late 2017. Unfortunately the situation continued to deteriorate in 2018 and this led to the former Leader, Cllr Ric Pallister, writing to GWR in May 2018 to raise our concerns more formally. In September the CEO also reiterated these concerns with DfT, Office of Rail & Road and Transport Focus.

Below is a summary of the response to date from Mark Hopwood, the Managing Director of GWR.

- He apologises for poor performance on the route and says it has not been good enough and that the route is important to them
- The route has been severely impacted by the volume of short notice and major upgrade works in the wider region linked to the unprecedented programme of infrastructure improvement in the region, including new train fleets (this means “cascaded” turbo trains on our line) and retraining of drivers and crew
- GWR have a joint performance plan with Network Rail that is being implemented, now that door modifications are complete on the local fleet, this should result in improved reliability
- They are working to improve performance and rebuild customer numbers. They have upgraded all their on-station help points

Comparative passenger numbers and reliability data for the Heart of Wessex Line is summarised below:

- Passenger numbers for 2017/18 were 2,047,000 a reduction of over 3% on 2016/17. This was the first decline, following consistent passenger growth over the 2002/16 period, which saw a tripling of passenger numbers
- The figures available to date for 2018/19, compared with the same period for the previous year, shows a drop of over 132,000 journeys, which is down by over 10%. It is likely that the poor reliability of the service is a major factor in this sharp decline
- Train Reliability figures on this line hit a low of less than 58% PPM* at the end of 2017/18. This compares with a GWR average consistently over 80%. It has since stabilised and shown a slight improvement with the most recent pair of 4-weekly figures coming in at 62% and 70% PPM

*(*this means the number of trains, which ran their entire planned journey and arrived at their terminating station within 5 minutes of being on-time in a 4-week period)*

GWR have a lot of work to do to restore passenger confidence in the line and provide a consistent and reliable service. The CEO is in talks with the Performance Director at GWR and a verbal update will be given at the meeting.

Partnership Work and Programmes

The Partnership acts as a conduit for the ideas and aspirations of the local communities along the line. Most stations have a voluntary group who tend gardens, help to keep the station welcoming and initiate local projects to improve station facilities, access or information. The Wessex Wanderers attract additional new visitors with their annual programme of free guided walks from the stations. Altogether the Rail Partnership Officer, who supports these groups, estimates that over 13,000 hours of voluntary time are gifted to the line and its stations each year.

Given the above situation about the train service however, promotion of the line is problematic. SSDC has taken the view that having a seat at the table, by being an active partner and host, gives us more influence in order to improve the line now and in the future.

- The Line guide produced 3 times a year, along with the excellent website, www.heartofwessex.org.uk is the mainstay of line promotion, along with eye-catching posters Seize the Sunday, which encourage the public to take advantage of year round Sunday services
- Station enhancement at Bruton – most recently a grant for the Friends of the station has enabled further garden enhancement and planting programme. The renewal of the yellow safety lining on the platforms at Bruton (mainline trains come through at 90mph) – this was important safety work.
- Upgrade of the help point at Bruton. Bruton Friends were very pleased to get a customer information source that works (they run on 4G mobile network rather than 3G and have small screens showing train running information)
- There is still an aspiration to have access to the south side of the station at Bruton. The initial feasibility work, conducted during 2017/18 was looking costly and difficult to deliver, but Bruton Town Council are seeking further discussions with GWR to see if a viable scheme can be devised
- Earlier projects at Bruton include additional seating for North bound passengers and a complete new signage system for the station.
- Parking at Castle Cary. This is a long-standing fixture on the Community Wish List to address the chronic inadequate parking provision at this busy station. The first 30 additional spaces should be completed in the New Year and additional land has been acquired for longer-term expansion.
- Earlier schemes include a community noticeboard and improved signage within the station to help visitors find the walking route into the town.
- There are 5 Sunday trains running throughout the year. The main gap is not having an early train up from Weymouth on a Sunday. Following much lobbying from the Partnership GWR are conducting feasibility work to achieve a train departing Weymouth at 8.20 am
- Yeovil residents can now make trips to Weymouth on Sundays out of the peak summer period and this has taken some of the pressure off the Saturday trains, which could be prone to overcrowding between mid-September and mid-May.
- The northbound Sunday services, running from April 2018, allows a full day out in Bath or Bristol
- Some services linking through from the Waterloo line, run by South West Trains, were launched in 2016/17. Further improvements to the timetable were envisaged for December 2018. Unfortunately South West Trains has not been able to implement any additional services to London from Yeovil (some routed via Bruton, Castle Cary and Frome) due to the embargo on timetable changes imposed by DfT following issues elsewhere in the country

Funding Support

The annual running cost of the Partnership in 2017/18 was £65,764. 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 up to £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 £34,132 although they are not signatories to the Partnership Agreement. The total funding expected in 2018/19 is £75,606 including a short-term award of £10,000 from Cross Country Trains for small projects.

Financial Implications

There is a £2000 provision in the Members' Discretionary budget for 2018/19. Under the terms of the Partnership Agreement it is requested that this sum is awarded as a Partnership contribution by the Committee for the current financial year.

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

Report to AEC September 2017;
