

Heart of Wessex Rail Partnership (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

Yeovil Pen Mill station is on the Bristol/Weymouth line. The Partnership promotes the destinations served by the line and actively supports community involvement in improving stations, which also encourages 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. A large group of volunteers, drawn from along the length of the line, freely offer their time and expertise.

Recommendations

It is recommended that Members:

- 1) Note the work undertaken by the Partnership in 2013/14 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 2014/15

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 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, circulated separately to the Committee

- 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 both the average for lines in its regions (Severn and Solent) and the national average for regional routes
- 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 the 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, and focusing on different destinations for each edition. The 2013 – 10th Anniversary – edition featured Top Ten things to do along the line, including Yeovil and Bruton, 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 need for improvements to the links between station and town – for arriving visitors in particular - has been identified at all three South Somerset Stations. An initial stage of improvements at Yeovil was implemented in March/April 2014, focusing on making the 68 bus easier to find and use, and indicating the walking route to town.
- Connecting Up guides for all three South Somerset Stations have been created, which show walking routes, key bus connections and general local facilities. These are available in PDF form on the website and is also available in print from station staff, train crews and volunteers. The Connecting Up guides will be kept regularly updated to reflect any changes to links and connections.
- 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 First Great Western (FGW) franchise for a temporary period pending a full re-tendering 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 to the DfT for inclusion in the new franchise, which was originally due to start in 2013. The franchise process was delayed and work continues to ensure that the priced option for an enhanced Bristol to 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 SSSC 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.

Cllr Ian Martin attended the annual Community Rail Conference, organised by First Great Western, to meet leading players in rail and press the case for better services.

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 stage of the "Fixing the Link" project at Yeovil (as series of signs for arriving passengers helping them on their way into town by the bus link or on foot) cost £1,200 from the Partnership's budget. FGW effectively "matched" this with a similar expenditure on renewing all the standard platform signing and helping departing passengers. Work on Fixing the Link continues with initial discussions with Marie Ainsworth to try and link the station in with work planned for town improvement.

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 £19,795 unallocated in the Transport Scheme Grants budget for 2014/15. 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.

Corporate Priority Implications

4. Ensure safe, sustainable & cohesive communities

Carbon Emissions & Adapting to Climate Change Implications (NI188)

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 and with minimal explanatory notes for easy reading and comprehension, and this is also available on the website. FGW ceased to produce a separate timetable for the line in December 2013, and this has increased the importance of the Line Guide, with demand for the print edition remaining high. It is a particularly vital resource for those without internet access. The train stations themselves have limited access for those with mobility problems on certain platforms, but the train operator does offer assistance to those who need help in making their journeys

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;*
