

Heart of Wessex Rail Partnership Update (Executive Decision)

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Purpose of the Report

To receive an annual summary of the work undertaken by the Heart of Wessex Rail Partnership during the last 12 months and the proposed changes to the structure of the Partnership. To consider making a partnership contribution for 2019/20.

Public Interest

The Heart of Wessex Line is an 87 mile route running from Weymouth to Bristol. The Heart of Wessex Rail Partnership actively supports community involvement in improving the stations and encouraging local communities and visitors to utilise the Heart of Wessex line for a wide range of trips and journeys thus supporting cohesive communities and promoting economic growth through tourism. The Partnership is resourced by contributions from local authorities and the rail operator, Great Western Railway, and a large group of community volunteers who offer their time and expertise.

Recommendations

That members:

- 1) Note the work undertaken by the Partnership in the last 12 months and the proposed changes to the partnership and that a similar report will be taken to Area East Committee.
- 2) Approve a funding contribution of £1,000 from Area South revenue discretionary projects grants budget for 2019/20.
- 3) Agree in principle that the Council's share of the Heart of Wessex Rail Partnership Reserve and share of any surplus from the 2019/20 revenue budget is transferred to the new Somerset and Dorset CRP to assist with start-up costs and appointment of a new community rail officer.

Background

The current Heart of Wessex Partnership was formed when seven local authorities (Bristol City Council, BANES, Wiltshire Council, Somerset County Council, SSDC and the former Dorset authorities (West Dorset and Dorset County Council)) originally came together with train operators with the objective of increasing rail passenger journeys to contribute to their sustainable transport objectives.

Historically the Partnership has employed a Community Rail Officer to deliver its's objectives. South Somerset District Council hosted this post and holds the Partnership budget.

There are three stations along the line in South Somerset; Castle Cary, Bruton and Yeovil Pen Mill. Accountability and financial support for the Heart of Wessex Rail Partnership has historically been shared between Area East and South Committees.

The Partnership supports the dedicated voluntary work of around a hundred local people delivering their own projects to improve the stations and promote local economies.

The Partnership acts as a conduit for the ideas and aspirations of local communities, and almost all of the stations have been adopted by local voluntary groups who have created gardens, help to keep the stations clean and welcoming and have initiated local projects to improve customer facilities, access and information. The Wessex Wanderers attract additional new visitors with their annual programme of free guided walks, and altogether in the region of 13,000 hours of voluntary time and talent are gifted to the line and its stations each year.

The national objectives for community rail development are to increase revenue, manage down costs and encourage greater community involvement in the local railway

Report

Current Challenges for Community Rail on the Heart of Wessex Route

The Community Rail Officer, hosted by SSDC, retired due to ill health in January 2019. This has had an adverse impact on delivery during 2019 not least the temporary halt in the production of the popular Heart of Wessex Line Guide. Chairman of the Partnership (from SCC), the Council's Specialist (Strategic Planning) and GWR Community Rail Officers have however, worked together to help sustain the work of volunteer groups during this period of transition and continue to provide grants to volunteer groups.

The departure of the Community Rail officer and local government reorganisation in Dorset has forced the Heart of Wessex Community Rail Partnership (CRP) to review its structure. The key challenges and issues facing the existing Partnership can be summarised as follows:

- The absence of a Community Rail Officer;
- External funding pressures in local authorities driving a continuing need for efficiency;
- Local government reorganisation, leading to potentially changing priorities and uncertainty over future resources;
- Diverse market profiles and priorities between sections of the route (North/South);
- An absence of an independent Chair/figurehead to drive forward strategic issues and galvanise and co-ordinate the efforts of individual authority partners
- A geographical overlap with other CRP's providing inefficient use of resources

Proposed changes to bring greater sustainability

Partners have agreed to restructure CRP's connected with the Heart of Wessex Line to remove duplication. It is proposed that The Heart of Wessex line will be served by Severside CRP, TransWilts CRP to the north of Westbury with the new Somerset and Dorset CRP covering stations from Westbury to Weymouth. The new partnership will be formed as a Community Interest Company (CIC) so that there are more formal governance arrangements in place and this will allow SSDC to relinquish its role as host authority. This will also allow the new CRP to achieve accreditation to The Association of Community Rail Partnerships (ACoRP) and unlock access to new funding streams.

Again it is anticipated that there will be local authority representation on the new Somerset and Dorset CRP Partnership Board (with independent chair) including representation from South Somerset.

Local stakeholders will be engaged through the establishment of a Heart of Wessex Line Forum which will include volunteer representatives. The new CRP will seek to engage with the Blackmoor Vale CRP (either formally or informally) in order to pool resources.

It is also proposed that a new overarching Heart of Wessex Line Strategy Group is established (meeting twice yearly) to co-ordinate longer term planning for the route. Membership to consist of

local authority partners, GWR, LEP's, WECA and Network Rail. This group along with the new Partnership will help to retain (and grow) the Heart of Wessex brand.

Close collaboration with volunteer groups will be retained through the continued hosting of working party meetings by GWR (2-3 times per year). A summary of the proposed governance structure is outlined in Appendix 1.

Work is underway to complete the paperwork required to transition to a CIC. It is anticipated that the new body will be created by February 2020. The new partnership aspires to appoint a new Community Rail Officer as soon as possible after becoming established.

Summary of Local Activity in the last 12 months and Proposed New Activity

In addition to the restructure and the ongoing excellent gardening work delivered by volunteers, the following local activity has taken place:

Castle Cary Station

Replacement toilet facilities and a complete modernisation of lighting for the 3 platforms and the pedestrian over-bridge have considerably increased comfort and safety for passengers.

GWR are to expand the station car park in the next few months with nearly 200 extra parking spaces becoming available.

The conversion of a historic building next to the station forecourt into a new visitor attraction is planned, where traditional hand-crafted cheese making operations can be viewed. This complex will form part of the multi-million pound enterprise known as The Newt in Somerset.

Due to an increase in passengers, the local volunteer group will be seeking to secure additional waiting shelters on the island platform, and also for a bus shelter for travellers using interconnected bus services.

Bruton

As part of GWR's customer Information Project, new information screens have been installed at the station at Bruton.

Wessex Wanderers

Wessex Wanders provide an annual programme of around 34 free guided walks from stations along the Heart of Wessex line between May and October. The group is financially supported by the Heart of Wessex Partnership. Walks this year have taken place at Yeovil Pen Mill, Castle Cary and Bruton stations.

Next year marks 25 years since the start of the walks and therefore the leaders are currently planning special events to celebrate this remarkable achievement including the production of a special programme (covering all stations) with history, pictures, local information and also celebratory events at some stations

GWR Performance during the last 12 months

Last year Members noted a period of declining performance in the train services on the Bristol – Weymouth line and the response from the Managing Director of GWR. The last few years have seen

an unprecedented programme of infrastructure improvements in the region and across the network, introduction of new train fleets and a substantial programme of recruitment and staff training and investment in stations and depots. Through 2018 punctuality at times averaged less than 70% (and as low as 57% at times) on a line that had previously seen over 80% of trains on time.

This year has seen a steady improvement in punctuality and reliability across the network and on the line, with performance on Bristol – Weymouth services back up towards 80%. GWR has implemented a joint performance plan with Network Rail on the route and the investments in the train fleet and in recruitment and training, combined with better infrastructure is starting to bear fruit. The Bristol – Weymouth line is vulnerable to imported late running from north of Westbury, which can be exacerbated by single line working south of Castle Cary and short turn rounds at Weymouth. Infrastructure improvements such as the re-quadrupling of Filton Bank (last December) has undoubtedly had a large beneficial impact on train times through Bristol and onwards towards Weymouth.

The December 2019 timetable change represents the largest timetable upgrade since the 1970s, with over 75% of train times across the network changing. Castle Cary will benefit from an improved service, with two hourly Exeter – London Paddington semi fast services connecting key towns and settlements across Devon, Somerset and Wiltshire.

The Heart of Wessex line timetable will stay largely the same, although the structure will support the future extension of Metro West services to Westbury, with opportunities for an improved service south thereof.

In terms of passenger numbers, 2019 has seen a return to positive growth, especially through the summer. In the six months from April to October, average growth on the same period in 2018 was 2%, with some periods in the summer over 5%. A summary of passenger numbers can be found at Appendix B.

GWR remain committed to realising the benefits of the investment in the last few years. There will be further benefits from cascaded rolling stock through next year and from modifications to existing trains to improve operation, which is an ongoing programme.

Funding Support

The annual running cost of the Partnership in 2018/19 was £73,722, which covered salary, printing, marketing costs and a local grants scheme to support local community-led station initiatives.

A formal Partnership Agreement sets out annual local authority contributions. Authorities with responsibility for Local Transport Plans put in the greatest contribution and district councils a lesser amount.

Great Western Railway has contributed £34,132 to the partnership for 2019/20.

In addition to the annual funding of £3,000 provided by Area East and South Committees (if agreed), funding of £11,890 is expected for 2019/20 from other local authority partners (of which £5,528 has been received to date).

Any annual revenue budget surpluses have historically gone into a reserve account. As of the end of 2018/2019 there was £27,917.80 being held in reserve for the Partnership. It is likely that this reserve will be split between the 7 local authority partners with the recommendation that the Somerset and Dorset authorities reinvest their share of the reserve (plus any underspend from the 2019/20 revenue budget) in the new Somerset and Dorset CRP. South Somerset's share of the current reserve is expected to be about £2,600.

Financial Implications

If approved, the grant of £1,000, amount can be funded from the Area South revenue discretionary projects grants budget.

Corporate Priority Implications

The Heart of Wessex Community Rail Partnership supports delivery in the following Council Plan focus areas:

Healthy, Self-reliant Communities
Economy
Environment

Carbon Emissions & Climate Change Implications

Maximising train travel reduces car journeys and congestion and therefore has a beneficial effect on reducing carbon emissions

Equality and Diversity Implications

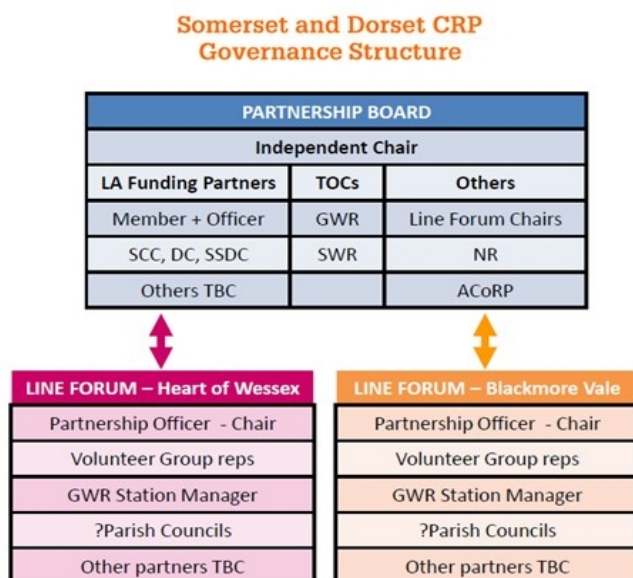
A local train service provides these towns with an alternative to car travel for people without their own independent transport. The Partnership has produced its line guide in large format type for easy reading and this is replicated on its website. The train stations themselves have limited access for those with mobility problems on certain platforms.

Background papers

None

Appendix 1

Table to illustrate the proposed governance arrangement for the new Somerset and Dorset CRP



Appendix 2

GWR journey summary for the Bristol to Weymouth Line

Period	2017/2018 journeys	% increase/ decrease	2018/2019 journeys	% increase/ decrease	2019/20 journeys
1	145,843	-1.90%	143,067	-4.90%	136,052
2	159,833	-4.96%	151,906	-5.36%	143,768
3	165,974	-12.03%	146,002	1.59%	148,326
4	167,761	-8.48%	153,533	4.57%	160,556
5	165,338	-9.86%	149,041	1.88%	151,842
6	159,882	-11.39%	141,666	5.28%	149,143
7	174,225	-15.96%	146,427	5.87%	155,019
8 (4 weeks ending 9 th Nov)	170,692	-14.55%	145,857	4.46%	152,364
9	194,059	-15.45%	164,086		
10	121,425	-8.68%	110,889		
11	140,116	-4.92%	133,218		
12	139,545	6.20%	148,200		
13	142,173	6.78%	151,817		
Totals	2,046,866	-7.87%	1,885,709		1,197,070