

Community Stations

Innovative community uses for railway stations and land

Advice, ideas and inspiration from the
Association of Community Rail Partnerships

Sponsored by the Rail Delivery Group



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Case Studies

acorp.uk.com/research-projects/communitystationsreport/

Appendix 1 - ScotRail franchise excerpts

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Appendix 2 - Northern Rail franchise excerpts

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Appendix 3 - Consultees

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Preface

Many train stations across Britain are being transformed and rejuvenated into very special stations, benefitting not only passengers, but also the wider communities around them. The impressive array of innovations and successes in this report has been driven by the communities themselves, with support from industry, with a vision of getting more from their railways and making a difference to local people.

Their efforts are returning many stations to the heart of the community, creating hubs for arts, education, enterprise, volunteering, healthy living, and social interaction. In turn, this generates pride and interest in the railway from the community, enhancing stations, and providing a warm welcome for rail passengers.

This report provides an overview of inspirational work by station groups, community rail partnerships, and their commercial, public and third sector partners, to return station buildings to community use. It shows the opportunities available in such work, and provides examples, advice and recommendations relevant to community groups and the rail industry.

We hope it will inspire and support more groups and organisations to develop community stations, to the benefit of our railways, heritage, and economy – but most of all to spur the type of community-led, sustainable development that makes such a huge difference to people's lives.

Jools Townsend, Chief Executive, Association of Community Rail Partnerships

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1. Introduction: a community rail success story

Britain is a world leader in community involvement with railways. Across the country, there are now more than 50 community rail partnerships, hundreds of 'station friends' or station adoption groups, and scores of examples of community organisations making great use of railway buildings and land. The benefits can be wide-ranging, to communities and the railways and their passengers.

This report, commissioned by the Rail Delivery Group (RDG), highlights many outstanding examples, covering diverse activities involving community groups, train operators and Network Rail. These case studies only scratch the surface, although we show a range of activities to do with arts and heritage, local food, and mixed-uses. This report follows *The Socially Enterprising Railway*, published by ACoRP in 2016 with backing from RDG. The emphasis here is slightly different, on the role of community organisations: groups that are not-for-profit and owned, in some form, by their local communities, whether un-incorporated voluntary groups, charities or local social enterprises.

The growing community rail network

The community rail movement now forms a growing, impactful and valuable part of the third sector. Hundreds of community rail partnerships and groups across Britain are brought together under the Association of Community Rail Partnerships (ACoRP) banner. Formed in 1997, ACoRP is supported by the Department for Transport, Welsh Government and Transport Scotland, as well as rail industry bodies. It provides a supportive network for community rail groups (including station friends as well as community rail partnerships), offering advice, ideas and guidance for ongoing development and innovation. See www.acorp.uk.com

The emergence of community stations

The last few years have seen a growing confidence on the part of community groups wanting to go beyond a traditional 'station adoption' model of reporting problems and carrying out modest upkeep and improvements. Encouraged by train operators and Network Rail, many have taken space in under-used, often derelict, railway buildings, and in some cases unused railway land, turning over these spaces to productive community uses.

National funding and policy

An increasingly positive approach from government and the rail industry, and Network Rail's system of 'community licences', has provided a framework for groups to work on property that is otherwise an unproductive eyesore.

There are dedicated sources of funding for community rail projects in Britain. In England, the Designated Community Rail Development Fund, administered by ACoRP, offers funding to projects on lines specifically designated as 'community railways' by the Department for Transport. Scotland's Stations Community Regeneration Fund (SCRF) enables community groups and businesses to transform redundant station property within the ScotRail area into facilities to benefit local people.

The SCRF was built into the new ScotRail franchise by the Scottish Government. Since then, the Department for Transport has taken a similar approach in England, requiring new franchises to

include funding for communities wishing to take over unused buildings. Thus train operators are starting to offer grants schemes and other funding opportunities directly to groups.

The contribution of the Railway Heritage Trust has also been significant, and its support crops up repeatedly in this report, in terms of expert advice and grant funding. Its objectives are to assist railway companies in the preservation and upkeep of listed buildings and structures, and in the transfer of non-operational premises and structures to organisations willing to undertake their preservation. See www.railwayheritagetrust.co.uk

Benefits and innovation

Bringing unused railway buildings back to life offers many advantages to the rail industry, not least making stations more welcoming and hospitable, and delivers a wealth of economic, social, health and wellbeing benefits to local people. At the same time, once-derelict buildings are restored to their former glory and beyond with funding from both railway and non-railway sources.

The benefits to communities are immediately apparent if one visits places in this report like Moorthorpe, Edge Hill, Millom and Ellesmere Port. These are urban communities experiencing high levels of social deprivation. In these cases the station has changed from being another derelict site to a beacon of hope and revival. In towns like Kilmarnock, Burnham, Beccles and Llandeilo, run-down and unappealing stations have been turned into attractive gateways to thriving communities.

It is not always an easy process. Community activists often work and think in different ways to the understandably process-driven rail industry. People who lead the types of project in this report are innovators, who see a bigger picture and plot creative ways to achieve their goals. This capacity to think big, while prioritising local people's needs, merits understanding, appreciation, and nurturing, not least within the rail industry. The challenge is enabling a meeting of minds so that the creativity and vision of community groups can be harmonised with the demands of today's railways. This can be a positive tension if both sides recognise what the other can offer.

This report highlights many success stories that can be replicated and learnt from, across Britain and beyond. These successes are very much down to voluntary and community efforts, but would not have been achieved without a supportive industry framework and enthusiasm and understanding from individuals and organisations in the rail industry. The challenge now is to ensure barriers are removed and the path set for more communities to reconnect with their stations and railways, to bring more buildings and land back into community use.



Art can be a catalyst for the creative station

2. The incredible edible station: cafes, catering and communities

One of the most common uses for surplus railway property is catering: the return of the humble but much-loved station cafe. This revival has been one of the great success stories of community rail. Most are provided by small, local businesses. Some are privately-owned, such as Wakefield Kirkgate and Millom, while others are community enterprises, such as Skipton and Etchingham.

What many have in common is that the initial impetus came from a community organisation. The complexities of dealing with the railway industry can be such that a small private business may be put off. Being guided by a community rail partnership or similar body can see a project through to the stage at which a small business can set up its stall.

The restoration of **Wakefield Kirkgate, West Yorkshire** – a major project involving more than £5m of investment – was the result of Groundwork Trust working with Network Rail. Funding came from sources including Railway Heritage Trust, Network Rail, Grand Central, Wakefield Council and West Yorkshire Combined Authority. By leading on the restoration and pulling in grants, Groundwork is now able to act as landlord to several businesses including the popular cafe ‘Taste Buds @ The Station’. One satisfied customer posted on Trip Advisor:

“Visited this new cafe as I was passing through Kirkgate Station in Wakefield. Decor was lovely, friendly staff, the menu has a nice range of foods suitable for breakfast and lunch and if you want to treat yourselves they have nice fresh cakes. I would definitely recommend giving yourself more time at the station to give them a try.”

The **Trackside Cafe at Millom, Cumbria**, uses space in a previously unoccupied station brought back to life. The station has been put at the heart of the town’s regeneration, with the café working alongside a thriving heritage centre and a booking office run

as a social enterprise. **See online case study** (acorp.uk.com/research-projects/communitystationsreport/).

An example of a community organisation directly providing catering is **Skipton’s Cafe Express**, run by the Settle-Carlisle Railway Development Company. It provides three jobs, uses local and fair trade products, and creates a positive passenger facility while providing a sustainable income for the Development Company. The room was empty after a failing café closed and needed refurbishment. The aim was to provide a welcoming ‘first sight’ for visitors, refreshments, and information on rail and the town. The café opened in 2008. Skipton is a railway depot and the cafe offers rail staff a discount, which helps build rapport. The Development Company leases the space from the train operator Northern on a full repairing lease basis. This means that the tenant is responsible for all repairs and maintenance as identified within the lease agreement.

At the **Glossop, Derbyshire**, a former booking office was converted to a small café in 2014 after the station was refurbished following years of near-dereliction. The High Peak and Hope Valley Community Rail Partnership and Friends of Glossop Station were closely involved in the development. The café, Twig Coffee House, is run as a commercial enterprise by a local businessman and is busy throughout the day. The premises are leased from train operator Northern. **See online case study** (acorp.uk.com/research-projects/communitystationsreport/).

Llandovery Station Cafe is run by a team of volunteers from Friends of Llandovery Station, using the former booking hall area. With help from the Railway Heritage Trust it was restored to a high standard and the lease is held by the Heart of Wales Line Development Co. They serve drinks, cakes and snacks in a welcoming waiting room with tables, sofas and a wood burning stove. The cafe is also used to display and sell local arts and crafts.



The Gaslight Cafe | Sandown, Isle of Wight

The **Gaslight Cafe at Sandown, Isle of Wight**, is another example of community enterprise. Supported by The Isle of Wight Community Rail Partnership, it opened in 2016, and is proving popular with passengers and local people. The project leaders were part of 'Music in the Community', a community project that took over the lease. Funding was acquired from the Railway Heritage Trust and Designated Community Rail Development Fund, managed by ACoRP. The tenants worked with the community rail partnership to make the rooms fit for purpose and carry out extensive community engagement. Alongside the café there are regular events, from jazz nights to charity talks. It is also used by local support groups, such as for over 50s experiencing loneliness, and prostate cancer sufferers. The lease is with South West Trains, whose representative is regarded by the community rail partnership as "very supportive and approachable", although they have experienced some complications with the lease management company that they are hoping will be ironed out.

The **community-run café at Etchingham, East Sussex**, has been running for six years, established by a locally-based community interest company (CIC) and operated as a commercial venture. Non-railway customers from the village and surrounding area use the facility as well as passengers.

The CIC was set up in 2009 as an outcome of the Etchingham Action Plan. Five local people formed the CIC, including people with a range of skills in business, administration, finance and funding applications, architecture, building and catering. The CIC aims to ensure Etchingham has the right elements to survive as a community, including a pub and meeting place, provided by the bistro. Profits from the CIC are used to fund new or existing community projects.

An increasing number of stations are being used for growing vegetables, fruit and herbs. The **nationwide 'Incredible Edible' movement** started at **Todmorden, West Yorkshire**, and from its early days the local station had herb beds on the platforms, where passengers were encouraged to pick samples and take them home.

At Todmorden itself, this has extended to raised beds in the area outside the station. Other stations where vegetables and herbs are being cultivated include Markinch, Croston, London Road (Brighton) and Kidsgrove. There is potential for extending this, with produce grown at stations potentially being offered for sale, used in station cafés, or by local groups and enterprises, or being given away as part of healthy eating or pay-as-you-feel initiatives. The Incredible Edible network offers advice and support for such initiatives.

See www.incredibleediblenetwork.org.uk

Tips on developing cafes and food growing initiatives

See chapter 5, p17, for more detailed advice on getting projects off the ground, learning from others' experiences, and achieving success. If the project being considered relates to cafes, catering and food growing, the following is suggested:

Consider different approaches, like the examples discussed above, so when the train operator and Network Rail are approached, there are some clear ideas formulated (see advice in chapter 5). It may be that a combination of food-themed projects can work in harmony together, or it may be best kept simple, at least at first. Giving some thought to this will help when considering the suitability of station buildings.

Explore what the community needs and wants. This includes assessing cafes, catering and other-food related facilities already in the area, and whether the community might benefit from increased access to healthy, locally-sourced affordable (or free) food, and learning about nutrition, food growing and where their food comes from. The local authority may be able to provide advice. Consider consultation events and surveys. Advertise any consultation as widely as possible, engaging organisations as well as individuals.



An increasing number of stations are growing fruit and vegetables

Work through the benefits, opportunities, risks and disadvantages of different options. For example, take care not to jeopardise an existing local project or business, such as by setting up a competing café. Some examples above create fulfilling work (paid and voluntary), opportunities for local suppliers, enhanced facilities for passengers and communities, and revenue for reinvestment in the community. Think about how connections might be built and how a positive feedback loop can be created.



Artists enjoy a group meal at Edge Hill's artists residency (image: Mark McNulty)

3. The creative station: arts, libraries, museums

Stations lend themselves to becoming creative hubs: they are public spaces par excellence where a range of people come and go. Many were built as creative statements, from the splendour of Bristol Temple Meads and London St Pancras, to smaller but still impressive stations such as Cupar, Grange-over-Sands, Edge Hill and Great Malvern.

Even modest stations can be transformed into amazing places. A growing number, while still performing their traditional function, have become art galleries, museums and libraries, often run on a not-for-profit basis, with a focus on broadening access to the arts.

An outstanding example of station as creative space is **Edge Hill, Liverpool**. The station has been transformed into a vibrant arts centre, with studio and performance space and offices for arts organisation Metal. **See online case study** (acorp.uk.com/research-projects/communitystationsreport/).

At **Kent's Bank, Cumbria**, **The Beach Hut Gallery** was established with funding from Northern Rail in 2008 and the North-West Co-operative Society, although it was not within the station lease. Looking out across Morecambe Bay, it is run as a local artists' cooperative and exhibits high quality work. Its website underlines the role of art in the community:

"Locally, tourism can be the focus for regenerating towns, new hope for communities and sustaining artistic and cultural activity of our historic and natural environment... The main...objective was to foster and support the principles and concept of co-operation amongst artists and the community, making art and crafts accessible to the general public."

See www.thebeachhutgallery.co.uk

The appropriately-named **Movement** was established at **Worcester Foregate Street** in what was a toilet. It has regular exhibitions and hosts resident artists. Gallery Director, Nina Coulson recalls, "It still had the urinals and cubicles when we got in. It had no electricity, and we had to dry line the walls, re-panel them, re-glaze the windows and take out the cubicles. But we've got a beautiful roof light – it's quite classical in that way, like a Victorian picture gallery." London Midland, the owner, charges Movement a peppercorn rent and provides support for sprucing up the building, with additional assistance from Railway Heritage Trust. It has recently won two years of Arts Council funding. Nina says, "Lots of people could do this – you could have a network across the country."

*Artistic residency | Metal at Edge Hill
(image: Mark McNulty)*



Todmorden Station has several artists' studios and gallery space in the station buildings, with regular exhibitions. The space is within train operator Northern's lease and is provided to artists on a peppercorn rent. The studios and gallery complement the 'incredible edible' vegetable and herb gardens (see previous chapter), and there is a modest community library in the station booking hall.

Banner Repeater is a not-for-profit, community-run arts organisation, committed to broadening access to the arts. It runs a contemporary gallery with a world-renowned library of artists' books on the platform at **Hackney Downs, London**. Coordinator Ami Clarke says:

"We have a programme of exhibitions, with new commissions from local and international artists, with a strong educational programme of talks and lectures, to open up discussion."

As well as generous opening hours to engage passers-by, the organisation has strong connections with educational institutions across London and beyond, running numerous initiatives to engage students. **See online case study** .

Another outstanding example is **Artline in Fife**, linking stations on the Edinburgh-Dundee route in a dispersed gallery, with each venue at or adjacent to a station. The unique buildings, many listed, display paintings, jewellery, poetry and artefacts. Maps are available at the venues and online, and there are regular 'Open Doors' weekends. **See online case study** (acorp.uk.com/research-projects/communitystationsreport/) and www.theartline.co.uk

Tyne and Wear Metro differs from the rest of the rail industry in that it has control over infrastructure. They often engage professional community artists to work with local people. In **Chichester**, a community artist worked with local charity Bright Futures to engage young women to design artwork for station poster sites.

At **Bede**, a community artist engaged local people to research the history of the area and interpret it through photography, to display on the platforms.

At **Jarrow**, the local Stroke Association took part in a wellbeing project. As part of their rehabilitation, group members identified a short walk from station to riverside and created a map of the route for display.

At **Leominster**, Fetch Theatre has taken over unused rooms on the northbound platform. It is a touring theatre company producing a highly visual style of theatre incorporating puppetry and mask work. It is committed to bringing theatre to audiences that may not have easy access to the arts. They have a sub-lease from the local town council, which leases the building from Network Rail.

Bury St Edmunds Station Master's House is the base for another rail-based arts initiative, led by arts organisation Smiths Row. The aim is to bring art and rail together for the benefit of the community, through a community meeting and workshop space, artists' studios and community rail partnership facilities. The large Grade II listed building was victim of theft, flood, fire, dry and wet rot, but through this project has received support from ACoRP, Abellio Greater Anglia, Rail Delivery Group and Mid-Anglia Rail Passenger Association. **See online case study** (acorp.uk.com/research-projects/communitystationsreport/) and www.smithsrow.org

A growing number of stations have **community-run libraries or bookshops**. Most are small-scale and depend on donations. Passengers can return books after reading or make a donation to keep them. Examples include Todmorden, Hebden Bridge, Warwick Parkway, Acton Central and Chelford. It is a simple model and usually does not require formal lease arrangement with train operators. However, it does require some management.

Typically, one or two volunteers take on responsibility for maintaining the books in a tidy state and receiving donations. In some cases, at smaller staffed stations, staff do this on a 'goodwill' basis. The station bookshops at **Pitlochry** (see online case study acorp.uk.com/research-projects/communitystationsreport/) and **Kilmarnock** are excellent examples.

Glenfinnan Station offers an outstanding museum on the West Highland Line, occupying the station building, former signalbox and station yard. There are publicised walks from the station, including woodland trails and a stroll to the viaduct. The signalbox includes a computer demonstration showing how the signals and points were worked from the box's 15-lever frame. Visitors are encouraged to 'have a go' at being a signaller, under supervision of museum staff / volunteers.

At **Borth**, between Aberystwyth and Machynlleth, part of the substantial station building is a volunteer-run museum recording the history of the railway in this part of Ceredigion.

Carnforth is another example of volunteer effort in preserving and celebrating the town's railway heritage (see next chapter). There is an emphasis on the work of filmmaker David Lean (*Brief Encounter* is shown in the small cinema on a continuous loop) as well as regular art exhibitions with a railway theme.



Borth Museum, run by volunteers

Tips on developing creative station projects

If the project being pursued relates to the arts and creative activities, the following points are suggested:

Bear in mind the benefits that a station location can bring to arts projects, and convey these to the community and partners. Stations often provide affordable space in the heart of local communities. They bring visibility, showcasing arts and cultural facilities to people who might not normally visit a gallery or museum, opening them up to a wider audience.

Consider how arts and cultural facilities can help to share heritage and history, both related to the railway and more broadly to celebrate the community's heritage.

Research funding and partnership opportunities available to community-based arts and culture projects. This might include grant opportunities (funders are often attracted to arts and heritage facilities in accessible public places) and partnerships with local creative groups and charities (including helping to engage the community). Consider arrangements with local organisations and tourism agencies to promote the project and engage volunteers.

Get in touch with the local authority: they may have arts officers who can advise, and who may have access to small budgets to help with feasibility studies.

See chapter 5, p17, for more detailed advice on getting projects off the ground, learning from others' experiences, and achieving success.

4. The station as a market: developing a cluster of multiple uses

Most case studies in this report are individual projects within an existing building. However, there are a growing number of multiple-use projects suitable for larger spaces. Having several uses often adds up to a more sustainable proposition and offers scope for projects and businesses to network. This might be termed the 'station market' approach. It is not without challenges – above all, co-ordination and management – but if the location is right, it takes the concept of station adoption and regeneration to a new level. Buildings that might have fallen derelict are given a new lease of life, attracting more people to the station and benefiting the wider community. Projects support, complement and trade with each other, and offer a varied attraction.

Carnforth, Lancashire, is a former railway town. Its station is best known as the setting for the film *Brief Encounter*. It has become a well-established example of several uses for a number of station buildings on a single (but split) site. At the 2016 Lancashire Tourism Awards its Heritage Centre was named as the 'Best Lancashire Small Visitor Attraction', demonstrating how a cluster of activities can add up to a successful attraction.

The Carnforth Station and Railway Trust Co Ltd (CSRT) was formed in 1996 with the aim of securing the future of the derelict buildings at the station, which were threatened with demolition.

The trust was able to raise more than £1m from a variety of sources including private donations, Lancaster City Council, Lancashire County Council, the Railway Heritage Trust and Heritage Lottery. The project was completed in 2003 with the opening of the heritage centre and refreshment room, following the earlier opening of the booking office and retail units.

The station's Gateway Building provides six retail units, leased to businesses. This includes the booking and information office operated by Lancashire County Council under a retail agency agreement with Northern, as part of *Carnforth Connect*, a rural public transport project. Further down the platform, Carnforth Models offers a range of model railway equipment and publications. The Snug is a locally run micro pub offering a selection of real ales with staples from the local Fell Brewery. The station's Island Building is run by the trust, with a team of volunteers looking after the museum rooms, gift shop and cinema. A substantial meeting and conference facility is located in the Furness and Midland Hall. The *Brief Encounter Refreshment Room* is run by a private business under a separate arrangement with the trust. The room is a replica of the refreshment room in the film. In addition, there is a community arts initiative, led by a community rail partnership.



Carnforth Station offers more than a "Brief Encounter" for visitors

Kilmarnock, Ayrshire, is an outstanding example of a 'station market' approach, with several rooms at platform level occupied by different community groups and scope for further occupants in street level rooms. Kilmarnock is a large industrial centre with a strong railway engineering tradition. The new community spaces have helped to support sustainable development. The station has an annual footfall of 600,000, ensuring a reasonably large market for activities at the station, though it has become an attraction in its own right too, benefitting the railway.

In 2014 The Kilmarnock Station Heritage Trust was formed by a group of individuals and community organisations seeking to refurbish the station rooms. The trust secured funding from The Railway Heritage Trust, Stations Community Regeneration Fund and East Ayrshire Council's Renewable Energy Fund, and Wabtec, with investment totalling £500,000. The project manager is Allan Brown, without whose vision it would not have happened.

The opening of the rooms, now known as Kilmarnock Station Community Village, was in 2015. In the first phase, seven rooms were brought back into use. They include: the First Class Gift Shop showcasing local arts, crafts and work from local colleges and schools; a coffee shop called Storm in a Teacup; The Killie Browser bookshop; workspaces at Creative Spaces, located in The Tower Room; meeting rooms; a community rail partnership office; and a records office for the Glasgow and South Western Railway Association. The Tower Room is the nerve centre for community projects and developments, offering shared office and break-out space. There is a focus on providing space for community and rehabilitation projects, involving media, music and active travel. An 'active travel hub' is developing, with plans to refurbish rooms in the basement as a bicycle maintenance area and a records office for the Glasgow and South Western Railway Association.

There is evidence that the initiative has led to passenger growth, and the busier the station becomes, the more viable each letting becomes. The renaissance of the station has encouraged Abellio ScotRail to invest further in it, including recent work to transform the subway.

A Scottish Government spokesperson commented:

"The bright modern facilities offer office space and meeting rooms used by a range of local groups, as well as a gift shop, book shop and coffee shop. These all provide employment and training opportunities for people with addiction and mental health issues, as well as rehabilitation opportunities for ex-offenders. The new community spaces have attracted a strong team of committed, creative and kind individuals who are creating a place of innovation, where business start-ups, social enterprise and community initiatives can start to thrive."

Cromford, Derbyshire, is a good example of a smaller 'mixed-use' project that has brought life back to a historic station area close to the World Heritage Site Cromford Mills, Derbyshire. The larger station building is split into two sections for business use. The smaller station building has been renovated and is now a self-catering holiday let. The buildings were winners of a National Railway Heritage Award in 2009. Funding for renovation was pursued through The Arkwright Society, which has a 99-year lease for the larger building with Network Rail. The total cost of about £260,000 was funded by variety of grants, including local and national heritage grants. The Railway Heritage Trust, Derby and Derbyshire Economic Partnership, Cromford Heritage and Economic Regeneration Scheme, Pilgrim Trust, and the Architectural Heritage Fund all contributed.

'Pop-ups' at larger stations provide another example. These happen at several stations managed by Virgin Trains as part of their 'POP-UP' initiative. Virgin Trains says:

"POP-UP supports small-to-medium businesses that are local to our stations along the West Coast Mainline. It gives local entrepreneurs the chance to set up a temporary shop in our stations – prime spots for some serious business exposure. A POP-UP can be as simple as a person promoting their services with a banner, or as professional as a full shop in the station. 150 businesses have now given POP-UP a go, at 17 Virgin Trains stations. It's exactly the sort of big break that can turn a fledgling business into a popular, profitable part of the community."

In some cases, stations host monthly pop-up markets, such as at Preston. Here, the wide ramp down to the main platforms provides space for stalls, including a local bookseller and author, cheese stall, pie shop and candle-maker. The initiative has spread to the East Coast route, with regular 'pop-ups' at stations such as Darlington.



The 'First Class Gift Shop' at Kilmarnock Station showcases arts and crafts from local colleges

Huddersfield Station, managed by TransPennine Express (TPE), has its own 'pop-up' activities, offering an example of a station friends group benefiting a larger station. Friends of Huddersfield Station staffs a visitor information point most weekdays, drawing on a pool of about 25 volunteers. This was set up as a joint initiative of the train operator and Kirklees Council, following closure of the town's tourist information office. A space is used by a number of local businesses to provide 'pop up' stalls, normally during the evening rush-hour. These include an award-winning local bakery, cake stall and flower sellers. The businesses have a simple agreement with TPE to conduct their activity at the station. TPE has also assisted Friends of Huddersfield Station with the loan of computer equipment, workwear and other in-kind facilities.



A continental flavour comes to Huddersfield Station with its 'pop-up' stalls

Tips on developing 'station market' projects

To pursue a multi-use project like those outlined above, the points below are suggested. See also chapter 5, p17, for more detailed advice on getting projects off the ground, learning from the experiences of others, and achieving success.

Developing multiple activities is likely to be more challenging, but the benefits are considerable. Typically, the 'station market' approach works best at medium-sized stations with plenty of space. The advice in chapter 5 about making contact early on with the train operator, Network Rail, community rail partnership (if there is one) and ACoRP, is especially important.

Activities should be complementary rather than in competition. The uses should be appropriate and not likely to cause disturbance to other tenants or passengers. There needs to be a means of selecting future businesses or groups. ScotRail advises *"Be selective when taking on tenants for office spaces, including seeking two references. It is better to have an office vacant for a month or two rather than having tenants who are disruptive."*

Having a paid manager / co-ordinator is desirable. There will be issues of common concern and working together through a station partnership body, involving the train operator where appropriate, will bring benefits.

A carefully planned staged approach is needed, in consultation and discussion with your community and partners. It might make sense to start with just one or two projects and gradually expand. This is the approach taken by Kilmarnock and to an extent Carnforth. For the cluster to succeed, the different elements need to work together, so consider how to facilitate interaction and collaboration. Helping the different groups, businesses or projects talk to and support each other, and carry out joint marketing, is important. Consider setting up a shared website, leaflets, posters and social media channels early on.

It may be appropriate to develop the project as a community trust, which would be able to apply for grants. This was the model adopted by Carnforth and has worked well.



Kilmarnock Station is an outstanding example of a 'station market' approach

5. Practical advice on setting up a successful project

There are several key elements that make for a successful scheme. They can be summed up as:

- Getting off to a positive start
- A powerful, achievable vision
- Strong community support
- A sound business plan
- Positive relationships, especially between community, rail industry and local government
- Developing networks, formal and informal
- Getting the right deal
- Achieving adequate funding
- Thinking creatively
- Persistence and passion

The advice below, under each of these headings, can be considered and applied by community organisations, train operators, Network Rail, and other organisations that might support or instigate such projects. Partnership working founded on mutual understanding, particularly between industry and community, is essential.



The London Contemporary Orchestra perform Steve Reich's "Different Trains" at Liverpool's Edge Hill
(image: Mark McNulty)

Getting off to a positive start

If pursuing such a project is being considered, a few simple steps at the beginning are suggested, expanded further in the sections below:

1. Lay the foundations for strong relationships, by engaging key partners early on. Community groups need to talk to the train operator and Network Rail: both will need to agree to and be involved in the project. In most cases, the property will be within the train operator's lease, but even if not it is advisable to seek their input first. Work with the local community rail partnership if there is one, or ACoRP, to start building a relationship with the relevant community or stakeholder managers.

Network Rail is now organised by 'routes', so it is necessary to engage the community rail lead within the relevant route. They can be contacted initially by emailing communityrail@networkrail.co.uk. Work with them to make sure that there is a safe, suitable, available space for the use you have in mind.

2. Thoroughly consider the potential impact in consultation and discussion with local people and rail passengers. A beneficial community project should not jeopardise other local groups and businesses, but work with them. Sound out local residents and station users to gauge views and gather ideas. This may generate support, so have a way to collect details and build your network.

This doesn't have to be lots of large formal meetings; other means may be less demanding of people's time and encourage wider involvement (see below).

3. Address the fundamental question of whether your group has the capacity, or ability to grow, to be able to deliver what is likely to be a demanding, lengthy project.

Capacity will probably need to be developed, so plan how appropriate resourcing will be secured, including skilled voluntary support, staffing, expert advice and funding. Support is available from ACoRP, in terms of advice, mentoring, and provision and signposting of funding. Another important partner may be The Railway Heritage Trust, if the building is of historic importance, such as if it is listed or in a conservation area, which can be checked with the local authority's heritage officer. It is also recommended to involve the local authority, who may be able to help with planning and local funding.

To sum up the many lessons from the case studies in this report, two key principles to guide the way you establish your project and build momentum are recommended:

Be prepared for a long haul, and plan ahead. Thinking about possible risks and pitfalls as well as hopes and bright ideas will help you turn ambitions into reality, as will setting out what you intend to do in a realistic plan that makes clear who is doing what and when.

Think collaboration, collaboration, collaboration. Help is there, in your area and nationally, so don't try to do it on your own! A sound relationship with the train operator is key, but your project also needs to be based on clear communication, consultation and engagement with the community (individuals and organisations). Good engagement and partnership working is likely to be the lynchpin to success.

A powerful, achievable vision

***"The only constraints are the limits of our imagination."** – An off-the cuff remark by the late Bill Bolt, TransPennine Express station supervisor at Huddersfield, who was instrumental in getting community projects off the ground.*

Most of those involved in the projects in this report stress the importance of having a clear, strong vision for a sustainable project. Simply wanting to rescue a building from decay because it is 'historic' is not enough: there's a need to think further ahead and more broadly than this. Richard Watts, of Community Rail Lancashire, commented:

"Schemes should not be developed for their own sake. They must be properly rooted in the community, with an identified need and a viable business case. There would be nothing worse than investing in a building only to see it wasted as there was no viable use afterwards."

Developing a 'vision' doesn't just happen. It takes time, discussion and negotiation. One individual's personal vision may not be what others want. Harmonising people's aspirations requires patience. Organise events where people can put in their ideas forward. There are well developed community engagement techniques, such as facilitated deliberation, which can establish common ground, a way forward and objectives that the community can collectively buy in to, while stretching people's creativity and imagination. For example, see *The Deliberative Democracy Handbook. Strategies for Effective Civic Engagement in the Twenty-First Century* (www.researchandmarkets.com/reports/2212941).

Increasingly, the old-fashioned model of a 'top table' with an 'audience' seated in serried rows is seen as inadequate and inappropriate.



The Friends of Glossop Station, putting ideas into action

If you really want to capture people's ideas and enthusiasm you need a more interactive approach, giving people space and time to work together and explore possibilities. It's important to engage with as wide a cross-section of the community as possible, making sure that there is range of ages, genders and backgrounds. That won't happen automatically and needs careful thought and preparation. ACoRP can advise further.

A vision might also be developed in light of examples in this report, or from visiting other schemes that are relevant to the project. ACoRP may be able to help arrange visits and groups may be able to get help with travel costs from the train company.

It is crucial that the vision for your building is economically sustainable. It may be possible to get the funding to restore a building, but funders will want to see how it will be managed once complete anyway: it's what happens after that is critical to long-term success. It's important to see projects not as narrowly-focused railway schemes but ones that have a wider impact on town and village life (see below, on business planning).

Strong community support

It's advisable to form a core committee, ideally of around six to 10 people, who are tapped in to wider networks and have the time, enthusiasm and skills to meet regularly and make things happen, in consultation with the community. But your group will only succeed with wider support in the community, which means communicating, consulting, engaging and listening. It's necessary to understand what your community wants, needs and aspires to.

Bobby Lock, Isle of Wight Community Rail Partnership, told us:

"Know your community. Get the right people to run the project. The Gaslight is successful where others failed because it is about community spirit and having an ear for the community. We are quite a way off the beaten track but when people come and see our project they get what it's about... A place like the Gaslight can be central to how a community holds together."

There is no substitute for persistent work and you have to manage the expectations carefully to avoid losing their confidence and support."

Stations by their nature are inclusive public spaces so try to involve everyone who may have an interest, and those who don't (or at least don't think they do at first). That is likely to involve coming out of your comfort zone and going beyond a narrow circle of 'enthusiasts'. Have you looked at ways of involving young people? Is there scope for working with local schools or colleges? Have you talked to community groups representing diverse sections of the community? See the section above on developing your vision for more on engagement.

Regular, ongoing communications, using a variety of channels, building in scope for interaction and discussion, is key. That means engaging your local newspaper(s) and radio, putting up notices, attending local events, setting up a regular email bulletin, and establishing an online presence using social media. A mix of channels, used together, means wider engagement. ACoRP can advise, but much is down to building local relationships and being attentive and open-minded.

Keep your communications positive, engaging and constructive: using them to vent frustrations can set back relationships. Use them to keep people informed about progress, maintain a sense of momentum, manage expectations, and explain how people can contribute and get involved. One project co-ordinator said:

"One of the key challenges is the working pace of the industry especially regarding leases. Funders and the public expect results much more quickly and you have to manage the expectations carefully to avoid losing their confidence and support."

A sound business plan

Aspirations must come with a healthy dose of realism: it is as easy to overestimate as to underestimate the potential, so don't become over-ambitious. A phased approach, as with any other complex community project, is best. It is important to also relate projects to wider local regeneration. John Yellowlees, ScotRail, commented,

"Victorian listed buildings seldom present lucrative opportunities for generating rental income, but bringing them into community use can support the wider regeneration of their towns."

A good business plan should, of course, be appropriate for the project in hand. This may sound intimidating but need not be. Sometimes in-kind help may be available from local professionals and partners, such as the local authority or train operator, or local community and voluntary services (VCS). In other cases, groups lacking confidence may be able to advertise for volunteers with skills in planning, management and finance. Groups should use the skills that are around them, but can also seek advice from ACoRP, which may be able to provide examples of similar groups' plans. For bigger projects, it makes sense to commission help from consultants, and funding may be available for this. However, if using consultants, ensure they are fully engaged with the vision, and that community engagement is part of the brief.

Part of sound business planning is exploring avenues for funding to ensure appropriate resourcing. This report suggests a number of avenues, plus you can seek advice from ACoRP, your train operator, and local authority.

Neil McArthur, who led the restoration of Irlam station, commented:

"There are two elements to the funding challenge: capital to improve the station, and revenue for the operation and maintenance to ensure the sustainability of the improvements and delivery of any services. You will only attract capital if there is a sound business plan delivering a commercial return on investment. There may however be an element of commercial activity within a plan. Station buildings can house businesses that are relevant to the station or even ones that are not; obvious examples are a café or business that addresses the needs of commuters. However, there are big gaps in the day between peak-time commuting hours, so it is helpful if the facilities also attract members of the local community during off-peak hours."

Positive relationships

The organisations that should be involved as partners in a project will vary but the train operating company, Network Rail and local authority are vital, as is talking to key people early on. Take the approach of continuous dialogue, engaging people in your ideas and planning, rather than waiting until you are further along before consulting. Working with the local community rail partnership is vital, if there is one for that line. If not, ACoRP can help groups make the first steps. They will have good relationships with the relevant train company and / or Network Rail team.

Local authority contacts may not always be obvious: consider if the scheme is mainly about transport, economic regeneration, arts and culture, engaging young people, or health and wellbeing. A big contributor to the success of Burnham station was the involvement of the council's cultural team. You will need to start talking to people, so don't be afraid to pick up the phone and ask questions. A potential way in is through local councillors who should have established contacts.

For a small, resource-limited, voluntary organisation, finding the right people within the rail industry who can help is critical to success and they need to see that you are serious. This may be a train company's community or stakeholder manager. Within Network Rail, you need to contact the community rail lead within the relevant route. You can get in touch initially through communityrail@networkrail.co.uk. They may ask for completion of a form as a first step towards securing a Network Rail 'community licence', which enables delivery of the project or starting work towards it. Once contact has been established with the relevant manager, it's necessary to demonstrate that the project is viable, but there may also be support available to plan a way forward and then work with them to make sure that there is a safe, suitable, available space for the use that is planned. The Burnham case study (see [online case study - \[acorp.uk.com/research-projects/communitystationsreport/\]\(https://www.acorp.uk.com/research-projects/communitystationsreport/\)](https://www.acorp.uk.com/research-projects/communitystationsreport/)), stresses the value of having one individual manager who is supportive and understanding of the group's aims.

Working in partnership requires give and take on both sides and an understanding of the 'drivers' of other stakeholders. The culture of community groups can be quite different to the railway industry, but with understanding, those differences can be productive. One arts professional said, *"If I were starting again I would look much more closely at the culture of the railway in the UK."* It is important for groups to recognise the framework that rail managers operate within, which is process-oriented with an emphasis on health and safety and commerciality, and the pressures on them. Some managers will find it liberating working with community groups, others may find it challenging. Seeing another person's point of view is important.

Increasingly the rail industry acknowledges that support and goodwill is there, within communities and organisations like ACoRP and The Railway Heritage Trust, to help make good use of their assets and contribute to their corporate social responsibility work.

To help more projects succeed in restoring station buildings to productive community use, the industry should continue to listen to, understand and support groups seeking to instigate such projects. Community engagement is as much a skill as timetabling or fleet rostering. Developing capacity in this area is important.

Developing formal and informal networks

If a group tries to develop a project in splendid isolation it might just work. But being part of wider networks – not just within the railway world – can add value, and is often key to community engagement and sustainability. Local councils for voluntary service (the name may vary slightly e.g. 'council for voluntary action') usually offer good advice on local networks, funding opportunities and like-minded groups. Search online, or ask your local authority.

ACoRP provides a network of community rail partnerships, station adoption groups, and others involved in delivering and supporting community rail. It can offer advice based on what others have done, and a means to connect and share ideas and experiences. There may also be local community rail networks that are helpful, such as through a local community rail partnership if there is one, or via your train operating company, which sometimes run community rail events.

There will also be scope to develop your own informal networks of groups doing similar things, such as around heritage, arts, work with young people or other issues. One arts professional told us, “We met a number of groups at ACoRP’s training sessions and have developed our own informal group of visual arts organisations in rail buildings.” A growing number of station friends and similar groups are visiting other projects to see what people with similar hopes are achieving; ACoRP can put you in touch. Sheila Davidson of Friends of Hindley Station told us, “We took the opportunity to visit Irlam and see what has been done there - here at Hindley we aspire to do something with our station building.” Some Northern station friends, Bentham and Mytholmroyd, have established formal twinning arrangements. Arriva has facilitated reciprocal links between station friends on Chiltern Railways with colleagues at Northern, providing free travel and ‘introductions’.

Groups can also develop networks through social media and other communications, such as an email bulletin. These are ways to exchange information and advice and keep in touch, as well as telling people what the group is doing. Establishing formal partnerships, or simply befriending or following each other on Twitter and Facebook offers a way to stay connected and develop understanding.

Get the right deal

The sort of contractual relationship that is suitable will vary depending on a scheme’s aims and scale. Seeking external advice is likely to be vital. ACoRP will be able to guide on contractual arrangements and set-ups that have worked well (or posed difficulties) for others.

In the case studies in this report there are references to tripartite leases, relatively informal agreements, community licences (a scheme operated by Network Rail), and long, 99-year leases (usually with Network Rail). Community groups should not be put off by the complexity of options, but it is important to use the knowledge and experience already out there. Sally Buttifant, Mid-Cheshire community rail partnership, said:

“Don’t accept that the only way forward is with costly legal agreements. It could be straightforward. If a community group takes on an unused space, they help keep it in good repair: this is a cost saving for the owner. Relatively small projects shouldn’t be stifled by legal costs, tripartite agreements and having to take on liabilities; with a good partnership project the liability and outlay can be borne by the train operator or Network Rail. Many station buildings that have no commercial use have been identified. A good community project protects a building and turns them from an eyesore in to a community asset.”

In cases where a group is taking on a substantial long-term liability, it will need a legal agreement of some form. Very often the cost of this, including the standard tripartite lease, can be minimised if complex changes to the wording are avoided. The legal costs for this can be discussed. If it’s a project that adds value to the rail asset there will be strong grounds for the owner to pay, but thoughtful negotiation may be needed.

Achieving adequate funding

Funding is one of the biggest challenges facing any project of this type. There is money out there and many case studies in this report highlight available sources. ACoRP is a source of information on funding and many historic stations have benefitted from help from the Railway Heritage Trust.

There are some general approaches common to all projects. Neil McArthur of Irlam (see above, on business planning) made the point about having a viable business plan if external capital needs to be attracted. This may be 'commercial' depending on what the project is, or it might be about meeting a community need. He comments that it is unlikely that commercial activity alone will support the amount of capital needed to improve stations for all users. If a building is dilapidated, the cost to a community group or small business of investing in it is likely to be prohibitive. Hence the importance of bodies like Railway Heritage Trust or the Scottish Stations Community Regeneration Fund for help with capital costs. But others may be able to help, including foundations, local authorities and others. A growing number of rail franchises, such as Northern, have a dedicated fund to help with station restoration projects (see Appendix 2); ask the train operator if one is available.

It may be worth considering other forms of fundraising, including less conventional forms such as crowd-funding, which can be effective for discrete, local projects with clear aims, as long as it is supported by effective promotional activity. The Heart of Wales Line Trail, being developed by the line's development company, is raising a substantial amount of money through crowd-funding. Bear in mind that fundraising events and promotions is not only a way of raising funds but can also help raise interest, awareness and build capacity, drawing in new people and raising the project's profile.

Think creatively

In some cases, there may be an empty or under-used building and a clearly identified potential use. However, the building may be in such a poor state of repair that the cost of bringing it back into use is prohibitive. There are occasions when it is worth persisting; Moorthorpe is an example. But in some cases starting again may be a better approach. Buildings, unless of outstanding historic value, are there to do a job. If the option of demolition and replacement with a new building makes sense, and can offer a more hospitable and sustainable facility for the community, it is perhaps unwise to be too sentimental about old buildings unfit for modern needs.

This was a point made by Richard Watts of Community Rail Lancashire:

"Accrington Eco Station offers an example. The new station building, owned by Lancashire County Council, opened in 2010, replaced a red brick building. It isn't an exaggeration to say that the current station building is the best the station has ever had, as the original Lancashire and Yorkshire Railway facility was very basic. However, what makes this unique is the 'bunker' used by CRL as its base and the centre of its school engagement work, currently being expanded. We expect over 700 pupils, students, apprentices and teachers to use the facility this year, [as well as] the local community rail partnerships..., community organisations and local station adoption groups."

Another Lancashire example is the new station building, again owned by Lancashire County Council, at Burnley Manchester Road. The building it replaced was historic, but had been in private ownership for many years and was in very poor condition. After exploring ways in which the old building could be brought back to use it was decided that the preferable solution was to demolish and start again. Few people would argue that the new building is anything other than a vast improvement. Richard Watts comments, "This modular design can be replicated at multiple locations and can be made as big or small as required."

In locations where the original building has been demolished – Llandeilo is one of hundreds of examples – new build is the only option and there is a growing number of examples of good quality design appropriate for the location (**see online case study - (acorp.uk.com/research-projects/communitystationsreport/)**). Llandeilo's hub building shows what can be done, at an affordable price, for a small rural station. Recently, ScotRail has provided a new catering facility at the new station at Tweedbank on the re-opened Borders Railway.

The next few years will see further re-openings. Examples include the East-West Rail Link and other individual stations. Thought should be given to providing community facilities at new stations that bring vitality and interest. The additional cost of providing community space at the start is small and can potentially be funded through different sources.

The need for persistence and passion

Virtually all of the case studies we looked at highlight the need for patience and persistence. One comment was typical:

"If you do decide to run a community project in a rail building I would advise being very patient, have time and money to last the negotiation and business planning phase, understand what the rail industry and your key stakeholders really want (look beyond stated policies) and have an exit strategy."

Again, being part of supportive network/s can be vital in maintaining hope and morale. It can be a lonely feeling battling against challenges and obstacles. Sharing it with people who have been through the same process can make all the difference.

Conclusions and recommendations

This report shows the positive contribution the regeneration of stations can make to communities, in terms of social inclusion and engagement, economic regeneration and wellbeing. It also shows how such initiatives feed back into the rail industry and passengers' experiences through making stations more sustainable, attractive, informative and hospitable. Getting a balance between a 'commercial' focus and one that recognises social responsibility isn't always easy but in many cases the two can work together and achieve results that make commercial and social sense.



Cromford Station, where an empty building has been transformed into a self-catering holiday let

The benefits

There is much agreement among industry, public sector bodies and those delivering community rail about the benefits of greater community use of railway buildings. Northern said:

"The main benefit is securing the future of buildings and integration of buildings into the wider community. Improving the perception of safety and security should also feed through to passenger numbers and revenue, hence making the service more sustainable in the long run. Community involvement can bring in extra funding (e.g. through accessing grants not available to the rail industry or local authorities) and in resource (and resilience) to drive complex projects like these through to completion."

A Merseytravel spokesperson observed:

"The benefits are tenfold both from a community point of view and in a business sense. The community begins to take ownership of the building and surrounding areas. The community develops pride in the area, reducing anti-social behaviour. It promotes a feeling of purpose, interest and achievement to those involved. It also creates resilience within communities. From a business sense it is excellent PR as the business becomes known by adding value to communities. It can reduce running costs and corporate involvement in that facility. It can increase footfall to the station therefore increased revenue and present untapped opportunities to businesses in terms of the engagement process and bringing together partners. Furthermore, it provides organisations with intelligence that may not be easy to come by other than through grassroots community activity."

In summary, the benefits for different stakeholder groups are:

For train operating companies these include: major improvement in the appearance of stations, making them welcoming and attractive places that attract additional patronage. This can also include reduction in anti-social behaviour, vandalism and trespassing. These initiatives make good use of 'problematic' assets that have little or no commercial value. They can attract external funding which the rail industry could not. They create attractive and welcoming spaces that encourage rail travel.

For Network Rail, the fabric of the station is protected and often renewed. Network Rail's social sustainability strategy focuses on caring for local communities and improving the passenger experience: two objectives that community stations help to meet. Network Rail is committed to creating a safe and tidy railway, and community stations contribute to creating a socially inclusive environment that can, in turn, reduce antisocial behaviour and trespassing in the local community.

For rail passengers, the benefits are a safer and welcoming station, often with facilities of direct benefit – cafes, art galleries, museums – that provide information, interest, and a warm welcome.

For the community, a community-engaged station is a key part in making communities attractive, vibrant places where people want to live and visit. Providing quality accommodation at stations on attractive terms offers scope for community organisations to develop and flourish, and for people to come together through fun, creative, social activities that promote understanding, cohesion, health and wellbeing.

For government, national and local, the benefits are 'all of the above' and more, with active stations contributing to community wellbeing and prosperity and truly sustainable, community-led development.

Obstacles and challenges

Having a shared awareness of the challenges, but also the scope of potential benefits, can help partners to work together to achieve common goals and maximise progress. Some common themes have emerged from examples we have explored, all of which can be overcome through building strong relationships and mutual understanding:

Timescales and organisational processes can be challenging. We are aware of some groups having expectations about how quickly and easily schemes can be implemented that are out of sync with the realities of working with the complexities of the rail industry.

A purely commercial focus within the rail industry can hinder progress, where the sole focus is on achieving commercial returns from an asset. We also encountered examples of managers facing challenges in balancing the demands of their everyday tasks and finding time for assisting community projects.

Inadequate engagement with the community is highly likely to throw up barriers and misunderstandings. This might include a narrow focus on a particular part of the community, lack of regular communications, or inadequate consultation and research from the outset.

Lack of forward-planning was also a factor in some cases, with some groups underestimating the time needed and scale of the work.

While frustrations have arisen in some cases, there are many positive examples of communities and industry working well together. Outstanding examples include Burnham, Poppleton, Carnforth and Wakefield Kirkgate. The establishment of Network Rail's Social Sustainability Team shows that the industry is engaging with communities to create social value and deliver wider benefit. At the same time, there is growing pressure from Government for Network Rail and train operators to cooperate across their activities to eke out maximum value from the railways. One government official said:

"There needs to be a cultural shift from rail operators and Network Rail to fully and more effectively engage with the "softer" side of running a rail service. We are getting there."

There are welcome signs of progress within the industry to create a more hospitable environment for community-led projects to flourish, and we hope this report will further encourage movement in this direction. In the recommendations below we suggest how a greater focus on small community-led projects could be developed to ensure viable schemes are taken forward.

Government support through franchising

The support of government agencies – particularly Department for Transport (DfT), Transport Scotland and Welsh Government – has been critically important in encouraging the work in this report. The Station and Community Development Plan has become a standard part of DfT-managed rail franchises. This encourages franchisees to engage positively with community organisations in making appropriate use of redundant rail buildings (see Appendix 2, online). It is still new but the indications are, from Northern and Great Western, that it is proving helpful.

Using the franchising mechanism brings benefits, but there needs to be a degree of caution. A DfT representative told us:

"A balance needs to be struck between encouraging/incentivising a franchisee and limiting greater innovation in this area through being too prescriptive."

There is also a need to link with other Government objectives, particularly economic development. A DfT representative told us:

"There's a need to align with DEFRA's policies around harnessing the economic potential England's rural areas have to offer, both for the prosperity of those living in rural areas and for the benefit of the UK economy overall, as well as considering other objectives."

The process of devolution is well advanced and we have seen the benefits of initiatives such as the Stations Community Regeneration Fund, administered by Transport Scotland. Further powers are being granted to the Welsh Government and a new franchise for Wales and Borders will be let in 2018. In the English regions Merseytravel has long had responsibility for the Merseyrail, and Rail North has become a key player with the new Northern franchise, let in 2016. A similar process of devolution is happening in the West Midlands and may be extended further. A Rail North spokesperson agreed more could be done in using franchising levers to get community benefits:

"...there needs to be a good understanding of where the potential lies for this sort of development in each franchise. Some authorities are also developing solutions for devolution of station ownership/operations. There will be different models in different areas and train operating companies may have a different role in the future in some areas."

The role of ACoRP and community rail partnerships

The Association of Community Rail Partnerships (ACoRP) plays a key role in supporting community groups and rail industry partners to come together and progress stations development, drawing on its funding from the DfT, devolved governments and industry. A DfT representative summed up their role as: *“To provide a centre of expertise to signpost community groups and partnerships in this area, disseminate best practice, and tackle industry blockages and barriers.”*

ACoRP’s membership includes a growing network of hundreds of station friends and groups, and scores of larger community rail partnerships working across a line or multiple lines. Its work includes:

Supporting members to take advantage of funding and development opportunities, make the most of their resources through effective planning and organisation, and promote their work and engage their communities as widely as possible and with maximum benefit;

Providing ad hoc advice and information to groups thinking of developing community rail activities, including community stations development;

Continually cultivating relationships with the railway industry, including train operating companies and Network Rail. This is often the key to unblocking problems that can arise, or helping community organisations consider more practical alternatives;

Acting as a link between community rail groups across the country, and a range of other not for profit organisations. This can help groups to network, learn, forge partnerships, and think more widely about the benefits their project might deliver for the community.

While ACoRP remains a small organisation, its recent growth means it is further developing its support work, providing a greater range of training opportunities and written materials, and better facilitating sharing and networking across its members and partners. See www.acorp.uk.com



ACoRP- community rail’s umbrella organisation

Recommendations

1. The rail industry has much to be proud of in its openness to assisting community activity, but there remain obstacles. Where train operators have a dedicated manager (many already do) with a clear focus on working with community groups and ACoRP, there is significant advantage to the ease with which non-commercial property can be brought into community use. These internal advocates help ensure colleagues across the business take a supportive approach. Similarly, Network Rail would benefit from similar resource on each route with a primary responsibility to work with community rail.
2. Managers within train operating companies and Network Rail with a property remit can benefit from training to aid understanding of how community organisations work. Secondments to community organisations could be encouraged. ACoRP and RDG publications such as this can also be a useful way to increase understanding of community rail. ACoRP can facilitate training and placements between train companies and community rail groups. Targets to find community uses for spaces could also be considered to help increase the amount and speed that these facilities become available.
3. The Office of Road and Rail could consider requesting that Network Rail has greater regard to maximising community benefits from its estate, with appropriate annual targets.
4. Network Rail and train operating companies could cooperate in identifying property in the railway estate suitable for community use, within and outside train operating companies' lease areas. ACoRP may be able to support such research. This should be shared among community rail partnerships and groups through ACoRP.
5. Where external property agents are involved, clear briefings from their clients are essential to ensure that community projects be encouraged and no unreasonable obstacles put in the way.
6. Ensuring that rail franchisees encourage community use of railway buildings is important, and the DfT and Scottish Government's approach should be continued and publicised. As part of the franchise process, it would be helpful for DfT to agree levels of required support with operators.
7. New stations present an opportunity to develop the concept of the station as a hub and incorporate community facilities, so it is important to work with developers to take into account potential community uses.
8. Network Rail, train operating companies, central and devolved governments and ACoRP would benefit from a stronger focus on collaborating on property, with stewardship from the DfT's National Community Rail Steering Group.
9. Reciprocal links, sharing of good practice and networking between groups undertaking community stations activity should be encouraged and supported. ACoRP has increased its role facilitating such sharing between groups, but the ongoing support of government and industry is critical to this.
10. The community rail partnership 'model' based on working across a line or multiple lines could be applied to larger stations where there is scope for multiple occupancy and partners. This could include having paid management if appropriate funding can be sourced.

11. Legal arrangements are currently adequate. They need to be used appropriately and sufficient resources identified to progress them. In some cases, an informal agreement may be sufficient. In others, a tripartite lease or direct long-term lease with Network Rail may be appropriate. It is suggested that legal costs should, where possible, be borne by the rail partner (Network Rail or the train operator). Not-for-profit organisations have limited funds and, in order for the project to succeed, it is advisable to have 'peppercorn' or zero lease charges for buildings, especially in previously disused properties.

12. Consideration should be given to compulsory purchase of former railway buildings in private ownership which are unused and/or unoccupied but which have a potential community uses. It is recognised that this would not be easy but should be explored further.

About the Rail Delivery Group

The Rail Delivery Group (RDG) exists to enable rail companies to succeed in transforming and delivering a successful railway. Rail plays an ever more crucial role in Britain, with long term growth in passengers and freight. RDG brings together all passenger and freight operators with Network Rail and HS2, providing services and support to enable them to succeed by delivering better services for their customers. This ultimately benefits taxpayers and the economy.

RDG continues to work with ACoRP, the Rail Executive and train operators to further the case for Community Rail activity and support for it, as well as improving train operators' knowledge of how the community role can help them and the communities they serve through practical examples.



For further advice and support please contact
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