



AC:RP
New life for local lines

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Communicating Community Rail

A research and guidance report by the
Association of Community Rail Partnerships

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Notes on terminology

Community rail

Community rail is a grassroots movement, comprising partnerships and groups working at regional and local level to connect communities with their railways (see below for more detail). This report focuses on community rail in Britain, where the movement originated and is largest, but may carry relevance elsewhere.

Communication

Within this report, communication is generally conceived as an area of work concerned with promoting particular messages, actions or activities, or increasing brand recognition, amongst multiple people. It therefore largely excludes inter-personal communication, but includes PR and marketing activities, online and email communications, and engagement and educational activities that seek to promote some kind of change. As the report considers, this definition means there are blurred lines between communication, marketing, consultation and community engagement, but this blurring may in itself be useful.

Political communication

This report draws on academic research in the field of political communication (and related fields such as politics and social psychology), taking a broad definition of this field as being concerned with communication that aims to affect social or political change. This field is not limited to party political communications, and holds many insights relevant to community rail practitioners and others in the third sector.

Third sector

The term third sector is used to refer the wider sector that community rail sits within: community groups, charities, and other organisations outside (but often working with) the public and private sectors, working on a not-for-profit or voluntary basis for social good, at a local, regional, national or global level.

Preface

Community rail is a growing, increasingly influential grassroots movement that works to build positive connections between communities and their railways.

Across Britain, it is made up of nearly 60 community rail partnerships, which promote, advise on and improve access to railway lines, and hundreds of station friends and other local groups that enhance stations and run volunteering or social enterprise activities. The movement is represented and supported by the Association of Community Rail Partnerships (ACoRP), the organisation behind this report.

Communication is fundamental to the community rail movement's purpose of engaging communities and ensuring they get the most from their railways. It is also especially important now, with increased passenger numbers and investment in rail, yet often negative media coverage. Community rail has a key role to play in helping communities to understand and have a stake in this rapid change. Yet communications activity varies across our members. While some are delivering innovative, successful campaigns, others are keen for further advice on putting their resources to best use in this respect and, in particular, using digital communications to engage more diverse groups.

This report examines how community rail partnerships and groups can communicate effectively – to engage communities as widely as possible, promote rail as a key part of sustainable and healthy travel, and ensure communities have a voice in the ongoing development of our railways. It considers what lessons can be gleaned from academic research to develop the effectiveness of community rail communication, and examples and insights from the field that tally with this and may be replicated. We hope it is useful to those working in community rail, their partners within government, industry and the third sector, and anyone interested in promoting sustainable travel or civic engagement at a grassroots level.



Jools Townsend,
chief executive,
Association of
Community Rail
Partnerships

The challenge of creating effective, good quality communications, in its varied and wide-ranging forms, is one that we face as a rail industry, alongside our community rail partners.

How we communicate with customers, colleagues, communities, and importantly potential passengers or volunteers, in a way that engages them with the story we have to share, or the product we are selling, is crucial.

We're really pleased to support this report, which will provide

valuable insight and guidance to all community rail groups and partners when they are considering projects, activities and their communications approach.

This publication is timely as Northern is 18 months into its new franchise, and modernisation plans are well underway, bringing new and updated trains, better stations and more opportunities to develop young talent and support social inclusion, which will make the North a better place to live and work. At the same time community rail in our region, and across the UK, is going from strength to strength. It's supported by an enhanced ACoRP team and, increasingly, sharing of best practice across groups as highlighted in some of the case studies you will read in this informative report.



Carolyn Watson,
community and
sustainability director,
Northern

Further practical advice

ACoRP offers further practical advice for community rail partnerships and groups on communications and marketing. This includes a guidance sheet on the 'Basics of Marketing and Communications', also sponsored by Northern, available at bit.ly/ACmcg17. ACoRP members can also access tailored support and advice on developing and delivering their communications activities from the ACoRP team by contacting them on info@acorp.uk.com or 01484 548926, and through webinars and seminars listed at www.acorp.uk.com/eventsawards.

Executive summary

Research, case studies and expert insights suggest significant opportunities have emerged for the community rail movement to develop communications activities that can help it to engage more widely and effectively.

In particular, new communication technologies enable these groups to not only get their messages across to large audiences quickly, with limited resources, but consult, listen and converse too. However, it seems important that digital communications are not regarded as separate to traditional methods, but intertwined and mutually supporting, given the way many people move

constantly between the on- and off-line. The need to communicate on an interactive basis – through both digital and traditional channels – seems of great importance in promoting sustainable travel, given the need to relate such behavioural messages to people's identities and lifestyles. It could also help community rail to engage more diverse groups, including young people.

Case studies show that community rail communications already draw a great deal on locality, but insights from research suggest there is scope to develop this further. In particular, interactive communications might be used to draw on people's perceptions of their local area, and therefore their sense of identity, to promote positive connections with the railway and build feelings of efficacy. There also seem to be benefits from creating a sense of fun and social connectedness, but combined with interaction to avoid cynicism. Community rail groups and partnerships might also develop more long-term thinking in terms of communications, telling their story, conveying what they have achieved in partnership with the community, and developing a positive vision with the community that people feel part of. This can help to build a sense of empowerment, which seems crucial to community rail engaging effectively and achieving its aims. This requires groups and partnerships to convey a clear sense of their history and identity, and their place as a grassroots entity, making clear that their communications belong to them and the community. Conceiving of communications as an integral part of community engagement, rather than a separate area of work, may help community rail practitioners, and others working at a grassroots level, to develop their effectiveness in engaging and interacting with their community and therefore delivering social value.



Why communicate community rail

Community rail is a growing, flourishing grassroots movement comprising nearly 60 community rail partnerships, working along railways lines, plus hundreds of smaller local groups like station friends and social enterprises, around Britain.

These partnerships and groups work to connect communities with the railways, ensuring local people get the most from the railway, have a voice in its development, and can make use of it as part of sustainable, healthy travel. This is in light of the importance of rail to the vitality of many communities in a range of ways: economically, socially and environmentally.

The work of community rail partnerships and groups is wide-ranging, especially given diverse local contexts. To give a flavour of this, alongside the case studies in this report, their work includes:

- running promotional campaigns, developing offers, and running initiatives to encourage people to travel sustainably to local attractions and events and break down barriers to rail travel;
- working with schools to educate children on using rail, as part of safe, sustainable and healthy travel;
- engaging groups with disabilities, mental health needs or other support needs to help them access rail, and take part in rail-related volunteering and arts projects;
- advising train operators on service changes, helping to secure and promote improvements, such as more frequent services or improved station facilities;
- running social enterprises linked to the railways, such as station cafes and bike hire schemes;
- managing volunteering activities to improve the appearance and upkeep of stations, such as gardening, or in some cases driving through major renovation and rejuvenation.

The work of community rail partnerships and groups, as this list suggests, demands communication. In some cases, marketing is needed to encourage involvement in specific initiatives, such as volunteering, attending events, responding to consultations, or using a social enterprise's services. In other cases, the work itself consists of communications, such as running campaigns to encourage better appreciation and take-up of rail travel, or promoting a special offer linked to an event or attraction.

More broadly, it is crucial for community rail partnerships and groups to communicate effectively to ensure they are engaging across the community, rather than acting as an exclusive self-selecting group. This is important to understanding the needs and aspirations of local people, improving access to rail across diverse groups, ensuring the community has a voice and is represented in railway development, and generally contributing to community development and inclusion. In other words, communication is fundamental to the purpose of community rail.

However, there are some challenges to community rail partnerships and groups being effective in their communications, particularly with the communication field evolving rapidly with the development of new technologies. There is a sense that community rail partnerships and groups must adapt and learn, to keep up with these changes and not be seen as out of touch, and to take advantage of the opportunities they present. As the research explored in this report suggests, new communication technologies may provide great advantages to those working in community rail, helping them to inform, engage, consult and listen on a wider basis, and thus represent and benefit their communities, in a cost-effective manner.

This section below explores the challenges community rail partnerships and groups face in harnessing the power of emerging communications opportunities and developing their effectiveness in this area of work. Below this, a review of academic research explores insights into how these challenges might be overcome and communication better used to further community rail's aims. This is supported by case studies from the community rail movement and expert insights giving more practical examples of how sights can be raised and impact developed.

Communication challenges

Community rail partnerships and groups are grassroots, community-driven organisations, working closely with the rail industry, local government and, often, other third sector and business partners.

Community rail partnerships (CRPs) are mostly made up of one or two paid staff members reporting to a board (usually voluntary, and/or representing the different partners).

Station friends groups usually consist entirely of volunteers. As in most third sector organisations, there is much passion, enthusiasm and knowledge,

in this case related to the area and railway, but resources are limited. This may bring difficulties for fully utilising a range of communication channels, especially digital channels that demand ongoing maintenance and interaction.

For example, an organisation employing one staff member for three days per week may struggle to make good use of Twitter and Facebook on the other four days. Such challenges are often highlighted to ACoRP through its contact with community rail officers, board members and volunteers, keen for more advice on the management and resourcing of such work¹.

As well as the broad challenges that resourcing constraints bring, there is a recognition within the community rail movement that its diversity could be improved, not least in engaging younger generations. This means that there is, in some cases, a lack of 'digital natives' engaged in community rail activities to offer the perspective and capabilities that younger generations often bring to communications.

Another challenge faced by the community rail movement, albeit varying across different areas, is its low profile, and misperceptions of its purpose. ACoRP's experience shows that community rail is far from being a 'household name', even among regular rail users. It does not feature in national media except occasionally specialist railway press, probably linked to the fact that community rail tends to take a collaborative and diplomatic approach, engaging in behind-the-scenes negotiation on rail development rather than vocal campaigning. As the representative national body of the movement, ACoRP's profile is relatively low amongst the public. This means partnerships and groups are starting from a more challenging position in their communications, as their *raison d'être* is not commonly understood as with, for example, local single-issue campaign groups (e.g. save our post office/pub/trees/bus service), or rail user groups. This position is complicated further by some misperceptions of community rail as being for railway enthusiasts, focused on railway heritage, or part of the rail industry. The challenge of establishing a clear, independent identity may become more critical as the rail industry steps up its (welcome and important) support of community rail.

Alongside these specific features of the community rail movement, there are some general challenges to do with promoting sustainable travel, widely cited by researchers and practitioners, which are highly relevant to those working in community rail. They can be summed up as follows:

- perceived or practical barriers to behaviour change – people get into travel habits that may be hard to change psychologically or practically, such as due to additional costs (especially if already paying for car ownership), poor facilities (such as no safe walking or cycling routes to a local station), and/or lack of skills, confidence, time or knowledge, perhaps coupled with a lack of motivation to overcome this²;
- intangible, long-term, accumulated benefits – many advantages of sustainable travel are not felt immediately, individually or directly, such as reducing air and noise pollution, helping to tackle climate change, and improving health through walking or cycling part of the way³;
- driving being held in high esteem culturally – certain cultural norms or commonly-held perceptions may make behaviour change more challenging⁴, such as seeing driving as symbolic of freedom and prestige, and an entitlement that one earns; this may cause some people to resist suggestions that they should not drive or drive less;
- low priority given to environmental issues – many researchers note that environmental issues are often regarded as low priority in public opinion studies and given relatively little coverage in the news; despite our dependence on our environment, such issues may be seen as separate to, and even in conflict with, social issues focused on people's needs⁵.

These potential barriers to people engaging with community rail communications may be heightened by a backdrop of negative media coverage of rail in Britain⁶, often focusing on overcrowding, delays, ticket prices and industrial action⁷. This type of coverage creates a narrative about rail letting people down, hindering efforts to communicate development to our railways and encourage their use. Although media coverage is not an entirely reliable barometer for public opinion, researchers point out that it is often seen to be representative⁸, and therefore can hold sway by creating a sense that certain views are the norm⁹.

Rail Delivery Group, which represents the rail industry, charts the meteoric rise of rail travel, which has exceeded predictions: passenger numbers have doubled in 20 years and are predicted to rise further¹⁰. This growth is pushing our railways – reduced by a third in the 1950s, 60s and 70s – to capacity¹¹. Now investment is being made across many parts of the network to develop capacity, reliability, accessibility and passenger experience, including new and refurbished trains, electrification (of some sections, although recently scaled back), digitisation, station improvements, and in a few places new lines and stations^{12,13}. This is coupled with the devolution of authority to manage railway franchises to sub-national level in many parts of Britain. Although there is clearly work to be done to ‘catch up’ with rises in demand, many refer to exciting and challenging times ahead for rail. It seems that community rail can play a vital role in ensuring communities have a voice in this development, and communicating to communities how they can derive most benefit from it. But being fully equipped and able to meet the communication challenges set out above within this rapidly evolving context, is key to this potential being realised.



Insights from research, experts and good practice

A large body of research explores how voluntary and community organisations can make use of communications to bring about social change, including specifically to encourage civic involvement and promote sustainable behaviours.

ensure the communities' needs and aspirations are heard in the development of rail; and deliver wider social and economic benefit through engaging the community in connection with the railway. The research analysis is interspersed with insights and advice from experts within the third sector and rail industry, and case studies that help to demonstrate how such insights can be put into practice.

Embracing digital

There appears to be scope for community rail partnerships and groups to more fully embrace and integrate digital communications. This can enable efficiencies, widen reach and engagement, and mobilise people to get involved, especially if a range of channels are used in an interlinked manner, with on- and off-line channels seen as mutually supporting rather than separate.

Researchers have debated the impact of new communication technologies on the third sector, and the extent to which they have changed the face of charity and community campaigns. While many show how digital methods have made communications cheaper, quicker and easier¹⁴, others point to deeper transformation, with campaigns delivered entirely online, and types of mobilisation that seem to relate specifically to the advent of digital communications¹⁵.

Within the community rail movement, as elsewhere in the charity sector, digital communications are being put to intensive use by some, but there appears to be much untapped potential, suggesting a need to more fully adapt. Developing this area could help community rail to engage communities more widely and efficiently, and in ways that were not possible when the movement first emerged.

Research shows that new communication technologies are being used to mobilise large numbers of people, sometimes rapidly and across multiple locations¹⁶, in support of particular causes, and that social media have become important "coordinating tools" for social movements¹⁷. There are many examples of movements spreading across wide locales rapidly through online networks, sometimes sparking offline mobilisation at a local, national or global level. In other cases,

This section relates this research to community rail, offering insights and suggestions on how communications can be more fully utilised to overcome the challenges above and achieve community rail's aims. This is based on an assumption, drawing on ACoRP's experience, of community rail's purpose being to: promote rail as part of sustainable and healthy travel;

mobilisation itself has taken shape online, such as thousands sending emails to business leaders, or proliferating messages through social media to show support for a cause, such as '#refugeeswelcome'. While community rail does not tend to involve overt, vocal campaigning calling for policy change, there are lessons from such use of digital communications in terms of encouraging different kinds of civic actions.

Research shows how such methods can be used to reach large numbers of people more quickly and cheaply than traditional communication methods involving speaking face-to-face or printing and distributing materials¹⁸, and offers greater control than going via traditional media 'gatekeepers'^{19,20}. This offers opportunities for community groups and partnerships with limited funding, in terms of broadening awareness and engagement. It also aids nimbleness, helping practitioners to respond quickly to changing or emerging trends or needs, such as showing support for a local event or coordinating responses to a consultation. While digital communications may appear an extra resourcing challenge, and developing skills and processes to adopt them may require initial outlay, over time they may enable efficiencies, and the benefits they can bring in widening engagement may offer additional funding opportunities.

A related point is that community rail may need to better acknowledge the speed and fluidity of online communications to take full advantage. Research suggests that people move through online content more rapidly than other sources of information²¹, with this creating certain expectations, thus placing particular importance on this content being up-to-date and regularly renewed. This seems crucial for community rail practitioners to bear in mind: in providing information online, it should be ensured

that people can get to what they need, or that which captures their interest, quickly, or they will go elsewhere. Therefore, a useful exercise for partnerships and groups is to consider why people might visit their website, who they are and what they need, and present information so they can find this quickly, without having to try multiple avenues, and understand it easily, without having to scrutinise it thoroughly. Ensuring that online content is well-maintained and regularly refreshed on an ongoing basis is clearly important, but may pose a challenge for resource-limited groups, as noted above. A possible solution may be to engage local people in volunteering to deliver communications, such as to improve, maintain or advise on a website or social media activity, which carries the added benefit of offering a different type of volunteering opportunity that might aid more diverse involvement, and bring wider input and perspectives. This also links with arguments below about the value of co-creating communications with the community and creating a sense of empowerment.

Advice on managing digital communications

Practical tips and suggestions on managing a range of communication channels, including digital channels, are covered in ACoRP's guidance sheet on the Basics of Marketing and Communication, available at bit.ly/ACmcg17.

Academics highlight that, particularly with the advent of mobile communications, people move quickly and fluidly not just through online information, but between the on- and off-line realms^{22,23}. In modern life, many daily offline actions are informed and supported by online media, and vice-versa. Consider a person who decides to go for a walk after looking at a weather app on their phone. They go to a shop to buy a paper, and sit on a bench to read it. They read an article and decide to tweet their opinion on it on their phone. Then they bump into a friend, who recommends a new café nearby. They go for a coffee and catch up, then later at home they post a positive review of the café on Tripadvisor, which boosts the café's rankings. While doing this, they check what the recommended attractions are in their area, and decide to go to a local museum the next day. This example shows the importance of community rail practitioners not

regarding on- and off-line communications as separate: by being joined up (for example, including web addresses and social media handles prominently on printed materials, promoting face-to-face events and press releases on websites and social media, and running campaigns that make use of all available channels), they can create a chain of actions that lead to engagement, and a natural spread of information across friends, families and networks.

Weymouth Wizard on social media

When improvement works diverted the 'Weymouth Wizard', an eight-coach, high-speed train, via the TransWilts Line on four summer Saturdays, the TransWilts Community Rail Partnership sought to take advantage. Working with Great Western Railway, they used social media and at-station advertising to encourage more passengers to try the train and have a day out at the seaside. A Facebook campaign in late July and early August 2015 was used to encourage local residents who are not regular rail users to try the TransWilts and spread wider awareness of the line and other public transport in Wiltshire. Over the short campaign period, a series of posts each reached thousands, with the most popular seeing a reach of 36,000, 302 likes and 240 comments.

All comments and questions were followed up quickly, with notes made for future work or constructive feedback where people had issues. The online campaign was complemented by at-station posters, and the TransWilts team travelling on the trains in branded t-shirts to engage directly with passengers. Quick surveys of passengers suggested that on one day in August 35% had heard about the train on social media, rising to 50% on a later date. Many passengers fed back that they had a really enjoyable day, encouraging them to make more rail trips as a result.

Researchers have noted that using online communications to spread information and action may be particularly powerful if it involves network 'nodes' (i.e. people and organisations) that are well-connected²⁴. If someone with lots of followers on

social media (or someone with influence over others who have lots of followers), shares information, it is likely to reach far more people, because of the viral effect. Therefore building links with people and organisations that are well-connected online can be useful to community rail practitioners.

This might include local media outlets like newspapers, radio and TV, or particular journalists on these outlets, who can often reach large audiences through their traditional medium as well as social media. Such relationships might be developed off- and on-line, such as through meetings and phone calls to let them know about planned activities, combined with messages, shares or replies on social media, demonstrating being switched on to their output. Community rail groups may also be able to work effectively with their rail industry and local business or third sector partners to coordinate communications activity and thus take advantage of their large followings on social media or other channels they own that reach large audiences, such as email bulletins. It is worth bearing in mind too that through social media, there may also be individuals in the area that are very well connected, such as bloggers, community campaigners, business-people and other thought-leaders. Identifying and engaging with people and organisations who are influential online within the area may offer promise for community rail practitioners, as considered further below.

Another insight from academic research about digital communications that is applicable to community rail relates to mutual creation. Where information can be 'personalised' and related to individuals' lives, there seems to be great potential for movements to engage and mobilise on a widespread basis via online networks²⁵. In other words, individuals appear more likely to engage with and pass on information online if they can make it their own in some way, such as through humour or creative expression, or being able to put across a personal example or perspective. A simple example of this is putting a post on social media that asks people for their views or examples (e.g. 'What's your favourite train journey?') or encourages people to share if they agree. A more elaborate example could be running a photo or video competition: an activity that is relatively common in the community rail world, but not always making full use of social media to engage and promote the results. Consideration of how co-creation can be more generally integrated into communication campaigns is returned to in the sections below.

Get tweeting - advice from Gary Rae

"There are nearly 11 million Facebook users in the UK, and by 2018, it's forecast there will be over 17 million Twitter users. Your work, your ideas, deserve to be heard by more people. Journalists, politicians and campaigners keep as close an eye on social media as they do 'traditional' media. It can be a daunting prospect, dipping your virtual toe into the world of social media, but it doesn't have to be. Imagine Facebook and Twitter as a giant noticeboard, full of information, ideas and contacts. You will know someone in your group or family who uses social media. Talk to them. Seek out their advice.

My top tips are: Think pictures. Keep it short. Have a natural 'voice'. Don't be shy in asking for action: people connect with emotion, with an appeal to their generosity, curiosity and common sense. Remember that unlike that big noticeboard, social media is a conversation, so let's talk – or rather, tweet!"

Gary Rae, charity communications specialist,
@gary_rae www.linkedin.com/in/garyrae01

Enabling interaction

Community rail communications should be designed to facilitate interaction, and practitioners may benefit from thinking of communications as inherently interactive. It may be counter-productive to assume that one-way broadcasting of information will persuade people to change. Instead, community rail might make greater use of digital communications and 'opinion leaders' to enable the circulation and coproduction of ideas.

An important area of consideration for community rail partnerships and groups, examined by many researchers, is that of interaction and co-creation. This is an issue that intersects with use of digital communications discussed above, but more broadly relates to how communication is used and conceived, in terms of whether it is seen as a method of broadcasting, or a form of dialogue. A review of community rail websites and materials suggests there is scope for communication to be thought of more in this latter sense, always seeking to build in opportunities for listening and two-way communication rather than one-way advertising or information provision. Research

suggests that, in contemporary society, this may be not just advantageous, but crucial for some to engage positively with messages, especially young people^{26,27}.

Some communication researchers refer to a “new era” of communication, characterised by fragmentation and multi-directionality²⁸. There are no longer a finite number of media outlets broadcasting news and information to ‘the public’, but we now all have the potential to produce news, reach large audiences and interact through digital media²⁹. In this way, communication flows are far more complex, with ‘audiences’ transformed into creators and communicators, and boundaries between media and audience, on- and off-line, blurred. This seems to have created, or heightened, particular expectations that communications should be interactive. Researcher James Stanyer points out that, even through more traditional media outlets, we are now constantly asked to contribute our views, influence outcomes or tailor our experience³⁰, such as through voting, call-ins or ‘the red button’. With online content, researchers have found that political communications are more likely to prompt action if they are designed to be interactive, rather than simply sources of information³¹. This has implications for community rail partnerships and groups whose websites and materials provide static information, without clearly and constantly directing to opportunities for people to comment, feed back or interact with one another. As noted above, there seems to be much scope for community rail to make greater use of social media, and better link other communications with social media, to address this. This may be particularly helpful in engaging young people, who many researchers suggest are likely to be turned off from communications that do not offer means for interaction and show that their voices are being heard^{32,33}.

Some researchers focus on the emergence of new technologies as enabling and necessitating a reformed way of thinking about communication, as multi-directional and complex. However, this is not an entirely new idea, and many argue that communication should be seen as inherently interactive. This appears a particularly relevant point in delivering communications aimed at influencing attitudes and behaviours, as in community rail, because “people don’t just mechanically fall prey to persuasion”³⁴, but are active in constructing meaning, related to their existing frames of reference, experiences and identities^{35,36,37}. Therefore, practitioners cannot simply put out information and expect people to automatically believe in and respond accordingly to its messages; they will interpret and respond to that information according to their personal perspectives, and may use it (or not) in varying and perhaps unexpected ways. This may seem like an obvious point, but many researchers point to examples of

communications, including those promoting sustainable living, being based on the contrary idea of ‘persuading’ people to change their behaviour such as by plugging gaps in knowledge, or threatening them with the consequences of not acting^{38,39}. The salient point for community rail practitioners is not that they can know and anticipate the individual responses of every person, but the need to consider wider contexts and influences on people’s thinking, and to maintain dialogue and listen to people’s responses. For example, if they are conscious of a particular issue causing negative feelings about rail travel in the area, then asking the community for views on this and how it might be addressed, as a form of two-way engagement, is likely to be more effective than issuing content that simply serves to draw further attention to the problem or skirts over it. Such discussions might take place on social media, at events or through focus groups, or drawing on local research such as surveys may be useful.

A useful concept that is not new, but has gained traction in light of our digitally-connected communications landscape, is that of opinion leaders playing a pivotal role in the communication of ideas and influence. A landmark piece of research in the 1940s showed how people do not only interpret and use communications as individuals, but socially, through conversations in groups and networks, with certain individuals playing a key part in the spread of ideas⁴⁰. While this research looked at how people engaged with political campaigning around elections, it resonates across the communication field and specifically with community rail. Consideration of how communications can prompt and inform conversations may help practitioners to design and deliver more dynamic, effective communications that provoke discussion and action. For example, encouraging people to think and talk as groups may be useful, such as by running ‘challenges’ like in the case study below, or asking, ‘What do you and your family think about green travel in our area? Chat to us at x event or on Facebook.’ Community rail communications might also help people to act as advocates in these conversations, such as by providing important facts and arguments they can pick up and use, particularly to help answer others’ questions or doubts. Given the power of personal contact in spreading ideas and mobilising people towards civic participation⁴¹, these sorts of techniques may be highly effective. Plus, with individuals now able to spread ideas rapidly and widely online, attention to how to best support conversations and engage opinion leaders may be more important now than ever⁴². Researchers suggest this may be an especially important way to spur more sustainable behaviours, by enabling people to engage in conversations that draw links between local day-to-day actions and big global issues⁴³.

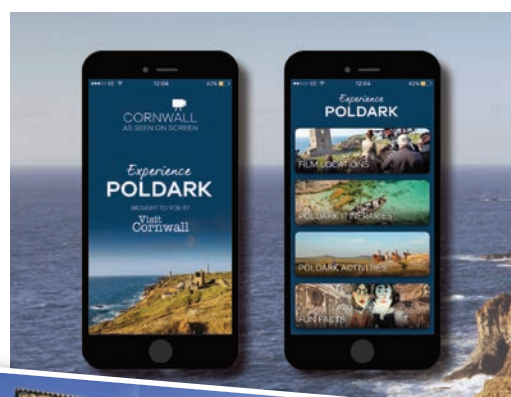
Interactive campaigns by Devon & Cornwall Rail Partnership

A long-running community rail partnership set up in 1991, Devon & Cornwall Rail Partnership is future-focused and puts interactive communications at the heart of its work. As well as using social media year-round to engage with people and partners across the region, and drawing on local research to inform its plans, the Partnership has delivered many successful, award-winning campaigns using multiple channels that are based around listening, understanding, responding and engaging people in co-creation. These include:

Seize the Sunday – This campaign made sure a long-awaited trial of a year-round half-hourly Sunday service on the Avocet Line in 2016 was a success. Behaviour change agency Ice were commissioned jointly by the Partnership and Great Western Railway to run focus groups and interviews to explore attitudes to Sunday travel and perceived barriers. The results informed communications that aimed to show Sunday rail journeys were easy, fun and popular by showcasing reasons to travel. As well as advertising and marketing materials tailored to different localities along the line, people were invited to interact with and help co-create the campaign through intensive social media activity using #SeizetheSunday and videos that people shared and commented on, plus a photo competition.



Carbon Reduction Challenge – This project engaged schools in raising awareness about how families' carbon footprints could be reduced by travelling by train instead of driving. It used an animated video featuring Coco the Cat, which was also shared online, to inspire the children, and encouraged them to act as ambassadors, talking to their parents and friends about reducing carbon. As well as being challenged to collectively reduce their carbon footprint, the children were also engaged in creative projects to promote the campaign's messages.



Visit Poldark country – In 2017, the Partnership helped Visit Cornwall launch an interactive app that fans of the TV programme can use to enable them to explore its locations by rail. The app's launch was supported by a wider campaign on social media and using interactive, entertaining promotional stands at stations including London Paddington.

Citizens' Rail – an EU funded project that worked across five localities across North West Europe, in the UK this focused on the Riviera Line, which benefited from additional rail services and activities to promote it. These focused around interactive community engagement, such as volunteering and a forum to hear people's views, and university students were engaged in coming up with ideas for creative marketing projects.



Interactive campaigns by Devon & Cornwall Rail Partnership

Continued

Love Looe – Using the strapline ‘We love Looe. We think you will too.’ this campaign brought together local businesses to raise the profile of Looe, following negative coverage in 2012-13 due to flooding. It included newspaper adverts and leaflets, which local businesses were asked to support, and a ‘Love Looe’ logo, which people and businesses could use as stickers and at events to show their support. Dedicated Facebook and Twitter accounts were set up.



As these examples show, Devon and Cornwall Rail Partnership has made interaction central to the delivery of its communications, and draws on local insights, and people’s experiences and views on the region, to ensure that people are helping to inform and co-create campaigns rather than just being treated as ‘audiences’. It therefore uses the region itself, and the pride and pleasure people take in it, as a resource for communications, linking in with the ideas explored below about enjoyment, identity, place and empowerment. Read more at www.dcrp.org.uk/projects.

CASE STUDY

Linking to locality and identity

Community rail communications already tend to be firmly rooted in a sense of place, but there may be scope to develop this further, such as by using communications in an interactive manner to better understand people’s lifestyles and views on their area. There is also potential to build a sense of empowerment by showing how people in different places are connected and working towards similar goals across the community rail movement.

As discussed above, taking into account the way individuals and social groups interpret, interact with, and co-create communications seems highly relevant to those working in community rail. An associated argument emerging through research is to do with how communications relate to people’s lifestyles and their sense of identity and place. This line of thinking offers a key opportunity for those working in community rail – of which many partnerships and groups already take advantage – but which could be developed further.

Some communications aimed at promoting sustainability have been critiqued by scholars for offending people’s sense of identity and therefore falling short. Many communications from charities and governments seeking to promote green behaviours have highlighted the damage being caused to people, animals and planet by unsustainable actions, and the urgency of individuals making changes to the way they live. Some scholars suggest this is likely to be ineffective, due to the way people’s lifestyles are bound up with their sense of identity, so telling people that their lifestyles are wrong may serve only to alienate⁴⁴.

Others warn that communications placing the burden of social change squarely on individuals’ shoulders can be off-putting because it is too much to bear^{45,46} and can conflict with practical barriers to change that people face⁴⁷. For example, messages like ‘Save the planet: leave the car at home’ may fall short because of the overwhelming scale of the challenge (to save the planet), especially if there are practical barriers (such as additional costs, or lack of bus, walking or cycling routes to the station). Although community rail practitioners do not tend to issue alarmist communications calling on individuals to change their travel habits to avert catastrophe, there are some helpful lessons from this line of thinking. Firstly, groups and partnerships may be able to develop greater understanding of local lifestyles and factors in people’s sense of identity, in order to adopt researchers’ suggestions to work with, not against, identity processes⁴⁸. For example, communications might draw on pride in the

Using research and surveys - advice from Transport Focus

“We know from our research that rail passengers’ key priorities are better value for money tickets, getting a seat on the train and more punctual, reliable and frequent services. However, our National Rail Passenger Survey shows that passenger satisfaction and issues do vary from line to line. Community rail partnerships are well placed to understand passengers’ local concerns and needs. Insight from engaging with communities, existing research or their own surveys can be used to promote the benefits of travelling by train and to communicate the work they are doing to help improve rail travel for passengers.”

David Sidebottom, Director, Transport Focus,
www.transportfocus.org.uk

EXPERT INSIGHTS

local landscape, or in being a diverse, friendly community, with messages like 'Taking the train helps us keep beautiful X beautiful' or 'Your community rail partnership: Proud to be part of vibrant X'. Again, engaging people in dialogue and canvassing views may help, such as asking questions like 'What does being from X town mean to you?' in surveys, on social media or at events. Using local research or data to understand travel habits, and specifically barriers to rail travel, may also inform communications. In addition, showing how community rail is working with the community to overcome barriers to change, to help people access sustainable living, rather than suggesting it is individuals' responsibility to change⁴⁹, may also be a useful tactic.

Many community rail communications are already working with people's sense of identity by being clearly tied to the local area. As Rootes says, communications, particularly in the sustainability arena, can use local places as "resources for... mobilisation", so campaigning is bound up with local identity⁵⁰. The value of doing this to promote engagement and influence behaviour is reinforced by social psychologists' assertions that the desire to belong is a powerful force in governing the way we act⁵¹. Linking to locality might seem a given for a grassroots movement, and is something that community rail partnerships and groups already do. For example, images of local landscapes

and landmarks are ubiquitous across community rail communications.

Many also work to build greater understanding and appreciation of local heritage, including showing how the railway is an integral part of the area's history. However, there may be scope to make more of this, and if resource-limited groups and partnerships are clear about the benefits it may help to focus their efforts. For example, while community rail groups and partnerships tend to make obvious that they are local organisations, some could make clearer their ownership of their communications and what they are, namely community-based, grassroots organisations. As noted above, community rail is not widely-understood, plus the multiple partners involved may obscure the origins of communications. There may also be scope for some community rail groups to make more obvious that their priority is to benefit the community in a way that aligns with local people's needs and aspirations, rather than simply enhancing a railway or station for its own sake. Finally, relating to arguments above, it may be beneficial for community rail groups to integrate better this sense of locality into interactive communications, so they are not only broadcasting messages about working in the local area for local communities, but also understanding and listening to those communities' views on enhancing their area.

Millom Station's Rail Room

Created as part of community-led redevelopment of this Cumbrian station, the Rail Room shows how community rail groups and partnerships can utilise the history of an area to encourage understanding of and pride in the railway. An innovative and educational heritage centre located adjacent to the platform, the Rail Room uses interactive and creative displays to enable visitors to discover the railway's role in Millom's industrial past and its current importance as a transport artery.

As well as being a facility for local school groups to learn about history and develop key skills, the centre's establishment forms part of a regenerative boost for this small town, which is recognised as an area of economic and social deprivation. Community Rail Cumbria, the partnership behind the project, says: "We are so proud of Millom, and we can see the pride it generates among local people. It actively promotes community, tourism and rail travel, and because of the way this is tied to local history, and presented in an interactive way, people are enthralled."

Although not all community rail partnerships and groups will have the opportunity to set up projects of this scale, there are clear lessons for community rail communications: drawing on local heritage, and the railway's important contribution, offers much scope for helping to reconnect people positively with their railways.

CASE STUDY



An opportunity highlighted by some researchers that is especially relevant to community rail, is to not only root communications in locality, but to use communications to build a sense of connectedness with other localities and global concepts. A number of academics have criticised communications promoting sustainable living for being too focused on distant and intangible concepts, such as climate change and melting icecaps, rather than day-to-day realities. Some argue that communications that focus on the local instead of the global are likely to have greater impact, at least for some people^{52,53}. In the community rail context, this might mean focusing on reducing air pollution and noise from traffic in the immediate area, rather than tackling climate change, by travelling by rail rather than road. However, other academics suggest that connecting big issues like climate change and its global ramifications with local life^{54,55}, building a sense of connectedness across localities⁵⁶, and 'anchoring' more remote concepts with the familiar and tangible⁵⁷, may help engage people in green issues and build a sense of empowerment. This seems highly relevant for community rail practitioners wanting to promote rail travel as part of greener lifestyles, or promoting sustainability messages in other ways, such as through community gardening around stations.



Cubs in Bugland at Mytholmroyd

CASE STUDY

Cubs in Bugland, a project by Mytholmroyd Station Partnership, is an example of how community rail can draw links between immediate, tangible local surroundings and bigger global issues. It involved the partnership working with local Cubs, as part of their ongoing youth engagement, in the construction of 'bug hotels' at the station. As well as making the boxes from recycled, locally-salvaged waste materials, the cubs were engaged in gardening activities, siting the boxes and unveiling them at a launch event. As part of the project, the cubs discussed the natural world and importance of protecting it. Alongside the 'hotels', posters were used to promote the project to passengers.

The partnership commented: "This was such a pleasing project for everyone involved. Not only has the station acquired some excellent bug hotels, but it has helped the youngsters' awareness of the fragility of the natural world, and how they can help sustain it. The project also reinforced the important message of civic responsibility that the children have taken on by being Cubs, and helped them to feel that it is 'their' station."

As well as the project itself being replicable, the principle it is based on, of linking simple local efforts that show care and pride in the immediate environment to wider sustainability and civic responsibility issues, is one that might inform communications efforts across the community rail movement.

An opportunity that might be better realised by community rail partnerships and groups, with support from ACoRP, is to show how the work they undertake is part of a wider network endeavouring to promote and enhance rail for the good of communities around the country. Several communications researchers suggest that local campaigns can successfully influence change in their area by drawing strength from wider networks^{58,59}, while others have argued that local, grassroots action can in turn inspire and fuel wider movements, even at a global level^{60,61}.

For community rail practitioners, this might be done simply by referring to the hundreds of other community rail groups carrying out similar or related activities, through direct partnerships such as station twinning, or by making use of the railway as a network itself and depicting other partnerships and groups 'along the tracks'. In this way, ACoRP and its members might help to avoid the pitfall mentioned above of overburdening individuals with the urgent need for behavioural change, instead building a sense of community and empowerment at local level that reaches out to a wider, supportive network of people striving towards similar goals nationally and beyond. This chimes with academics' arguments that networks themselves can lend strength and help to build momentum towards social change⁶², and that a sense of hopefulness and confidence is needed if we are to further mobilise at a grassroots level towards global sustainability goals⁶³.

Linking to your locality – advice from Northern

"The "We are Northern" campaign, launched in Summer 2016, was developed to enable people to identify with living in the North and being Northern.

It uses strap lines such as "We are Bold" "We are Brave" to further strengthen the identity of those living and working in the North. The campaign was designed to inspire people to get out and enjoy everything the North had to offer, from the seaside to the city to our amazing rural landscapes, no matter what the weather or season.

All the "We are Northern" campaigns have used a range of communications from TV, to posters to social media. The key has been engaging with individuals and getting their views on what it is to be Northern and live in the North. A good example is our Instagram pages; people send in pictures using the #wearenorthern. This has been particularly successful and we have some stunning and diverse images that demonstrate people's passion for the beauty and diversity of the North."

Jo Morley, head of brand and business development, Northern



Promoting positivity

Community rail communications are often positive and create a sense of enjoyment, which research suggests may be valuable. However, there may be scope to develop this further by using fun across a greater range of channels, in a more inclusive, interactive manner. Community rail might also benefit from using communications with greater consistency to build relationships between people, the organisation and railway over time, and show how progress is being made.

A common criticism of third sector communications, particularly related to promoting sustainable living, is their sometimes gloomy, negative or critical nature^{64, 65}. Many charity campaigns are designed to provoke indignation or guilt in the hope of increasing awareness and ultimately engendering social change. Although community rail communications are largely positive in tone, in some cases decidedly upbeat, there are still some relevant considerations for practitioners in how their communications engage emotionally. The idea that emotional and 'rational' responses to communications are inextricably intertwined, and that emotion must be recognised as a key driver of behaviour^{66, 67}, is an important theme in communication research, and a salient point for community rail. If building a positive connection between community and railway (or a station) is the broad purpose of community rail, then research points to a range of ways communications can be effectively used towards this.

Researchers have described emotional responses to communications as being evoked in "response to the detection of personal significance"⁶⁸, so this relates closely to the ideas discussed above about rooting communications in the local area and linking to people's lifestyles and identity. Given the nature of their work, community rail practitioners may benefit from communicating positively about the local area, but there is also a balance to be struck with acknowledging practical problems that some might face related to rail travel, and allowing for negative feelings about rail that may be prevalent, as noted above.

Some research has highlighted that entirely positive communications may be less impactful or memorable^{69, 70}, or they may provoke a cynical reaction that the organisation behind them does not grasp realities. Again, using communications in an interactive manner seems critical, to understanding barriers and issues and showing that community rail is all about engaging the community collaboratively and countering these.

In this way, while positivity seems important, it may be more effective and less likely to provoke cynicism when combined with dialogue and understanding of different views, and used to show hopefulness of making things better⁷¹.

Research suggests there may be value in communicating not only in a positive and interactive manner, but also in creating a sense of enjoyment, and using communications to build or reinforce social bonds⁷². This is an approach used in some community rail activities, but could be developed further. For example, the tradition of running enjoyable social activities on or connected to trains, such as 'music trains' and festive activities, stretches back to the early years of community rail, and may have played an important role in raising its profile (see below). Such events enable participants to gain enjoyment from rail, while socialising with others who are simultaneously gaining enjoyment, and building familiarity with the railways.

However, while this sense of fun is apparent in certain community rail events and activities, it might be utilised more through non-face-to-face channels such as websites, printed materials and social media. Indeed, research has highlighted the importance of humour to social movements and social media specifically⁷³, suggesting there may be value in conveying the ethos of fun social events through such channels, such as using videos and images from these events alongside humour and encouragement to get involved. There may also be scope to introduce this sense of fun to awareness-raising and educational materials, like those advising of local attractions or promoting timetabling changes, for example by asking people to consider (and feed back) what's the most fun they could have along the line. This chimes with academic work suggesting that people may be unlikely to engage with communications that are gloomy, distant or overburdening^{74, 75, 76}, so building a sense of social bonding and fulfilment may be more useful in communicating socially and environmentally responsible behaviours.

Penistone Line music trains

CASE STUDY

'Music trains' have played a surprisingly important role in the history of community rail, and help to show how community rail communications can make use of light-heartedness and fun on an ongoing basis. These fun social events, which are simply aimed at people enjoying themselves with other people and music on a train, were launched by the first community rail partnership on the Penistone Line in the mid-1990s. Taking advantage of new later evening train services, they were an instant success, and the publicity they generated enabled the partnership to expand. This helped to spur the community rail partnership concept being adopted in other parts of the country.

Brian Barnsley, ACoRP's senior operations manager and treasurer of the Penistone Line Partnership, says: "Music trains are successful because they are fun, but they have played an important role in community rail and there is a serious side to it. There's no doubt that they have raised the profile of the partnership and community rail generally. But also they reflect the ethos of community rail, which is about helping people feel good about the railway and their community, and bringing people and railway together. We continue to see this fun side of community rail coming through in our members' work."

Kent Community Rail Partnership's smoothie bike

CASE STUDY

This example shows how event-based communications can be delivered in a fun, interactive way to boost reach and get people thinking and talking about important issues. Kent Community Rail Partnership has been making use of a 'smoothie bike', with the Partnership's branding in the wheel, at local events as part of promotional stands. This included at a stand at St Pancras Station organised through ACoRP's annual Community Rail in the City event. Although these sorts of stands to engage passers-by involve conversations, often information is provided in a fairly one-way manner, such as handing out leaflets and displaying banners. However, the smoothie bike offers something different, where people are invited to get pedalling on an exercise bike, powering a smoothie maker and taking away a free drink. As well as being a fun way to draw people over to the stand, it promotes important messages about using rail in combination with walking and cycling to the station, and the fitness benefits of travelling through active, sustainable means. It also provides a talking point, that people can chat to friends, family and colleagues about or share on social media afterwards.



Another relevant argument forwarded by communication researchers, particularly to do with sustainability communications, is the need to develop engagement and a sense of momentum over time, through consistent and coherent messaging. For example, with environmental communications, Lakoff argues that the framing of such issues must be developed over time, through consistent use of language, imagery and associations⁷⁷. Others argue that such communications have failed to significantly encourage greener behaviours because of a “plethora of messages” from multiple sources⁷⁸. This resonates with a point made earlier that communications from someone with whom you have some form of relationship are especially powerful in spurring civic action, and the challenge of community rail not being well known. This idea of developing understanding over time through clear and consistent messaging seems especially crucial for partnerships that involve multiple parties whose priorities may differ, and vary over time, and which are complex and multi-faceted themselves, such as local authorities and train operators. In addition, with much of their funding reviewed and renewed annually, community rail partnerships' planning often takes place annually rather than through long-term strategies. Some are also fairly new entities, with additional partnerships being set up each year. In this way, some may not have built a strong and coherent brand presence over time, and may find doing so challenging.

There is arguably scope for partnerships in particular to benefit from creating longer-term communication strategies, agreeing ongoing messages with partners, ensuring their ‘ownership’ of their communications is always clear, and using channels that can help to build familiarity. A big part of the challenge seems to be community rail partnerships establishing and constantly reinforcing their own clear, consistent (and independent) brand identity, despite the range of partners involved. There also seems opportunity for partnerships and groups to make greater use of communications to tell their story, explaining why and how they were formed and, crucially, how they have worked with the community to bring about change over time. Again, channels that facilitate interaction, such as social media and local events, and content that demonstrates listening and dialogue, may assist with building relationships between members of the public, the partnership or group, and the railway, and demonstrating that progress is being made by working together.

Empathetic communications – advice from Trina Wallace

EXPERT INSIGHTS

“Empathy is crucial. When your communications get people to feel something that they can connect to their own lives, they are more likely to engage with you, and believe in what you say. Yet many things can get in the way of this deceptively simple idea. From lack of time to limited resources, and from internal politics to jargon. I suggest four key ways to create more empathetic communications:

1. Go back to your organisation’s key values – communicate the benefits of what you do, not the nuts and bolts
2. Put yourself in your audience’s shoes – don’t assume people know about you already, and use language they will understand
3. Focus on feelings – talk about the ‘people’ side of what you do and the difference you make to individuals
4. Avoid overcomplicating – don’t lose sight of the purpose of communications, and keep contents focused.

In this way, creating empathetic communications can help you meaningfully connect with audiences. Read more at www.charitycomms.org.uk/how-to-create-empathetic-communications.”

Trina Wallace, copywriter, editor and charity communications consultant, www.trinawallace.com

Building empowerment

Community rail should focus on building a sense of efficacy and empowerment through communications, by showing that a positive vision of the future can be achieved by people acting together, locally and across the community rail network. Conceiving of communication as itself a form of community engagement, and thus making engagement more inclusive and open, seems key to this.

A cross-cutting theme that arises in each of the sections above, but seems deserving of closer attention, is that of using communications to build a sense of empowerment, and creating the idea that the community can itself bring about positive change that it 'owns' and benefits from. The sections above consider how using digital and interactive communications, linking to locality and drawing on people's sense of identity, and building positive feelings and relationships over time, can all help to engender a sense of efficacy. This, researchers argue, is key to effective engagement and civic mobilisation^{79,80}: if people believe what they do has an effect, and they have a voice and a stake in change, they are more likely to act and engage. There seems scope to better nurture such beliefs through community rail communications. This may be particularly important in encouraging sustainable behaviours, and engaging more diverse groups.

As noted above, there seems more that community rail groups and partnerships could do to tell their story and build relationships consistently over a longer period. Related to this, many scholars propose that communicating a positive, achievable vision of the future is important in communications related to sustainability, yet is often lacking^{81,82}. Encouraging people to look forward in this way, towards a future they are part of and help to achieve, appears to be a useful way to work with people's sense of identity to build efficacy and mobilisation⁸³. Yet this articulation of a hopeful and inclusive future seems lacking from many community rail communications, which are often focused on the here and now, what has happened recently and what is coming up in the immediate future. There seems to be opportunity to build into communications what partnerships and groups want to achieve in the long-term, alongside, as noted above, where they have come from and what has been achieved so far. In this way, communications can create a narrative that connects past and future, and which everyone can contribute to. Interaction, as discussed above, seems integral to developing community rail communications in this way, if people are to feel they have a stake in this vision and have helped to create it. In other words, if community rail practitioners are to start

articulating a longer-term vision for their community and railway, they need to use communications to develop this vision *with* the community and communicate it together, linking back to the points above about recognising and working with advocates and opinion leaders. As researchers highlight, bringing about sustainable lifestyles should be explored and brought about with people, not dictated or imposed^{84,85}.

Kilmarnock Connections

CASE STUDY

An ambitious community engagement and art project that forms part of the regeneration of Kilmarnock Station shows how community rail can build a sense of empowerment. ScotRail commissioned community art organisation WAVEparticle to lead the project to develop an installation for the previously drab station underpass, with a brief to ensure that local knowledge and participation was central. They hosted a series of community workshops, including at the station bookshop, Dean Castle and local schools and colleges. They encouraged people to bring a drawing, story or anecdote that says something about Kilmarnock or the station. The response was overwhelmingly positive, with more than 250 people getting involved. People put forward stories and images that celebrated the town and the part the station has played in local history. These provided inspiration for the artwork: 10 wall-mounted display boxes that allow content to be added on an ongoing basis, as a 'living museum', with individuals and organisations invited to exhibit objects and artefacts.

Although this project was on an ambitious scale, linked to wider station regeneration, it suggests how everyday communications can be used to good effect by centring around participation and local people's perspectives. Drawing on people's knowledge and stories, and helping these to be shared and re-told – through station displays and posters, online, or through social media discussions – can help to nurture feelings of pride and pleasure in the community, and help people to connect with their railway and each other.



The concept of working together is also of great relevance to community rail practitioners in using communications to build a sense of empowerment and thus engage more widely. Some academics talk about the value of showing the difference people's actions can make, particularly regarding sustainability issues⁸⁶, where some may be inclined to think that individual efforts are futile compared with the scale of global problems (for example, 'what's the point of changing my ways when most other people keep doing the same?'). To show the difference individuals can make, it seems necessary to show how individual acts are replicated, echoed and interlinked on a broader social scale; in other words, we must show how people are acting together to make a difference. It could be argued that community rail partnerships and groups are already doing this ably, such as through communications showing groups of volunteers working alongside one another, and partnerships demonstrating the range of organisations they bring together.

However, there seems room for development. Firstly, communications showing people and organisations working together need to be linked to a long-term vision of the future and story of progress achieved so far, as noted above, to be convincing that something meaningful is being achieved and progressed towards. Secondly, this further adds to the case for communications to acknowledge how community rail groups and partnerships are part of a wider networked movement, striving towards similar and interrelated goals across localities. This seems critical for community rail to demonstrate how people are acting together on a broad scale, as they will otherwise be necessarily limited in showing only work in their area, in some cases involving a very small group of people or partners.

In addition, there seems to be scope for some community rail communications to underline more clearly the range of ways people can contribute towards their vision, and therefore be more open and inclusive in their communication of people acting together. It might be argued that community rail websites and promotional materials are not always as outwardly-focused and inviting as they could be, assuming that people already know what community rail is, or only providing information rather than suggesting ways to input. In other cases, they communicate quite narrow opportunities for engagement, such as only promoting meetings, or volunteering at stations. On a practical level, not everyone will be able to engage in these ways, such as due to time constraints, childcare responsibilities, mobility problems, or lack of confidence. Greater use of communications, particularly digital opportunities, could help to counter this, by offering

a greater range of engagement opportunities, some quick, easy and resource-light, catering to wider audiences⁸⁷. For example, social media and online surveys can be used to canvass views, perhaps on topics that will be discussed at a local meeting, so these views can be fed in. Such methods may also help to develop relationships with individuals over time⁸⁸, who may increasingly be prepared to commit more time and effort. For example, by occasionally engaging with a community rail group on social media, an individual may build up confidence and interest to attend a meeting, and then start volunteering. This links back to the arguments above about making greater use of digital communications, and conceiving of communication as inherently interactive, but extends the point by suggesting that communication is seen not as separate to and supportive of community engagement, but a form of engagement itself. By putting a post on a community rail partnership's Facebook page, reading a bulletin, picking up a leaflet or asking a question at a community event, that individual is not just accessing information or having engagement promoted to them, they *are* engaging and contributing to the partnership's aims, especially if it involves them communicating their views back.

If community rail practitioners start to regard communications as an integral and vital part of their community engagement, not as something separate, this creates an impetus to communicate in a broad range of inclusive, interactive and social ways, that are inter-linked and aligned with one another, and designed to work with and enhance locality and identities. This would show that community rail groups are listening, caring and open, thus helping them to be more diverse, more engaging, and more community-driven. Ultimately, it helps community rail to achieve its aims and generate greater social value, by building efficacy and empowerment locally, and showing that everyone can get involved, make their voice heard and have a stake in the development of their community rail group or partnership, their community, and their railway.

Young people engaged in promoting the Abbey Line

CASE STUDY

Despite being close to London, and providing a quicker route than other modes of transport, the Abbey Line suffers from low passenger figures. The main reason is the low frequency of trains due to the lack of a passing loop. The Abbey Line Community Rail Partnership has undertaken a project to enable young people in the area to find new, exciting ways to promote the Abbey Line and increase use, especially at off-peak times. Students from a local college were asked to create a presentation on attracting new passengers. They presented ideas ranging from date nights to cycling events to complete rebranding of the line, most of which included use of social media, websites and apps. Three concepts stood out, and these were put in front of the partnership's steering group and then train operating company London Midland, in a meeting at their headquarters set up by the partnership. One idea is now being taken forward, with communications being created under the heading 'Abbey Days Out', and a second is under consideration. The Abbey Line CRP says: "The project gave the students the experience of researching an idea and being creative, while learning about travel and how to work to a brief that considers local needs. It also provided students with a realistic prospect of their work being implemented, and helped to develop their self-esteem. But also, by getting students involved, we drew on their valuable perspectives on how modern methods can be used to appeal to wider audiences."



Putting empowerment at the heart of communications - Paul Salveson

EXPERT INSIGHTS

"Community rail is about the rail industry and the communities it serves working together as equal partners; each brings something distinct and valuable to the partnership. Over the last 25 years community rail has helped empower communities to directly influence their rail services and facilities and create a positive vision for the role of rail in local communities. Effective communications have an extremely important part to play in this process – experience across the movement shows how valuable it is to not just communicate a positive vision, but to engage the community in creating that vision in the first place, making sure that what you do reflects and understands the community's needs and aspirations. It extends well beyond 'the railway fence' and is about linking the whole development of a community and its railway, with the station becoming a real hub of community life and the train service a link between communities, large and small."

Professor Paul Salveson, founder of ACoRP and the Penistone Line Partnership, community rail expert

Conclusion and recommendations

A number of recommendations emerge from the above research analysis, expert views and case studies for how those working in community rail might make greater use of communications to achieve their aims.

These are summarised below. Partners working with community rail, such as those within the rail industry, local government and third sector, may also be able to use these insights to further support community rail partnerships and groups and enhance the way they work in partnership on communications. These are intended as general points that will apply broadly across the community rail sector, to aid reflection, discussion, planning, and strategy development. More practical advice is available in ACoRP's guidance sheet at bit.ly/ACmcg17, or counsel on specific projects or opportunities is available directly from ACoRP for its members and partners.

Community rail partnerships and groups may benefit from adopting the following inter-related and complementary recommendations.

Embracing and integrating digital, including:

- Bear in mind that digital communications may enable wider, faster, cheaper and more nimble engagement, especially if thoroughly inter-linked with other communications. Although adopting these channels and using them effectively has resourcing implications, it may bring efficiencies over time and open up additional funding avenues.
- Ensure online communications are kept up-to-date and regularly refreshed. They therefore need to be manageable. Promoting this work as a volunteering opportunity may help.
- Deliver on- and off-line communications as inter-linked and mutually supportive, allowing for people moving constantly between the two. This means signposting across all communications to websites, social media, bulletin sign-ups, and face-to-face engagement opportunities.
- Identify and work with people and organisations that are well-connected online and can aid the spread of ideas and information across larger numbers of people and the building of relationships.
- Use digital channels for mutual creation of campaigns, including encouraging people to share, discuss, be creative, personalise, and help to make communications their own.

Enabling interaction, including:

- Consider how interaction can be built into all communications, such as through asking questions, encouraging discussion, and pointing people towards opportunities to share, pose queries or forward views, such as through social media, surveys or events.
- Think of communications as inherently interactive, with individuals reinterpreting and using content in varying ways according to their perspectives and contexts. This means putting yourself in others' shoes, using local research and information, and engaging in dialogue, to understand and allow for the different ways that people will interpret and respond.
- Consider how best to encourage and support conversations, given the way that people will reinterpret communications through social interaction with those around them. Encouraging people to act as ambassadors, running family challenges, or simply providing talking points may help.

Linking to locality and identity, including:

- Work with, not against, people's sense of identity, by avoiding telling people their lifestyles are bad or inadequate. Instead, show how community rail's aims align with local pride in the area and are based on an understanding of the locality and people's lifestyles.
- Use locality as a 'resource' in communications, linking to local landscape, culture or heritage, while making clear that the priority is to listen to and benefit the community in a way that aligns with local needs and aspirations.

- Connect small local steps that people can take to wider issues, relating tangible things being done in the area to concepts like sustainability and civic responsibility, showing how individuals can make a difference by working together.
- Show that community rail partnerships and groups are part of a wider community rail network, varied but connected across localities and making a difference towards common goals.

Promoting positivity, including:

- Speak positively about the area and community in ways people can relate to. This may be most effective in or combined with interactive communications that demonstrate listening, to avoid cynicism.
- Use fun and enjoyment, to build relationships with people, and facilitate social bonding and inclusion. This principle might be applied much more widely than just at events, such as through social media.
- Create a sense of progress and momentum over time, to build relationships and create positivity, including through consistent messaging and branding ensuring communications are clear who they originate from, and telling the partnership or group's story.

Building empowerment, including:

- Communicate a positive, achievable long-term vision of the future that people feel part of and can help to achieve. This means developing this vision with the community, and communicating it together.
- Constantly show how people are acting together towards this vision, including how far you have come together and how others can contribute, and how this forms part of a wider community rail movement.
- Put empowerment and participation at the heart of communications, and regard communication as an integral and essential part of community engagement rather than a separate activity. This should help with communicating in an interactive manner across a range of channels that engage as widely as possible, and demonstrating that involvement is welcome from anyone and that everyone's contribution makes a difference.



End notes

- ¹ Throughout this report, as well as drawing on academic research, case studies, and advice from relevant experts, we also draw on the experience of the Association of Community Rail Partnerships in supporting its members. This consists of anecdotal evidence from conversations, meetings and events, drawing on what community rail officers, board members and volunteers say and ask, as well as data collected through member surveys, event feedback forms, and support needs analyses.
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