

## Community rail's role in Covid-19 recovery and renewal - May 2020

*An overview of the role community rail partnerships and groups can play to support our communities' and railways' recovery, and help to 'build back better'*



Covid-19 has caused much devastation within our communities and detriment to our rail network. Community rail, like most aspects of life, has been turned upside down, and most of our usual activities paused, postponed or cancelled, and worries about what the future holds.

Yet community rail continues, and will, we believe, become doubly crucial, over the months and years ahead, to help manage the great challenges we face together, and to aid the recovery of our communities and their vital railways and transport links. Community rail can also play a critical role in helping transport, rail and society to 'build back better': by building on some of the opportunities that have emerged from Covid-19, to become more resilient, sustainable, inclusive and caring.

### Where are we now?

Across Britain, there are 71 community rail partnerships and 1,000+ station groups, brought together under the umbrella of the [Community Rail Network](#), which supports, advises and champions. Community rail has expanded, diversified, and grown in confidence in recent years. We have a supportive [government strategy](#) in place, the backing of devolved governments and combined authorities, enhanced support from the rail industry, and a burgeoning [evidence base](#) of impact on community empowerment, sustainable and healthy travel, social inclusion, and sustainable economic development.

Of course, Covid-19 has also caused much uncertainty and worries, to do with volunteering, events and much other usual work being on hold, and the effects on rail services, their use, and income security. Initial messaging on lockdown easing has included firm directives to not use public transport unless essential. Yet there has also been much work to adapt, support local resilience, and maintain communications and dialogue with local communities (see below). There is also a sense of community rail's growing importance in the months to come, especially by playing its traditional role of promoting rail, when the time comes, as well as the chance to seize opportunities that have emerged, to do with forging more community-minded, less car-dominated ways of living. While there are constraints, community rail is eager to do as much as it can to support rail and local partners to cope with challenges and help to build back better.

### Community rail activity during Covid-19

While most usual activities have been paused, including in-person volunteering, events and engagement, community rail has not downed tools. Our members across England, Wales and Scotland have been adapting, rethinking and responding. Partnership meetings have been moved online, time has been used for reviewing, planning and development, and social media use has been ramped up. They have been keeping in touch with their communities, staying positive, and staying productive. There have also been inspiring efforts to support local resilience and vulnerable people, from working with food banks and distributing meals from station cafes, to wellbeing arts projects run online. [See examples.](#)

Community rail has also continued to play its crucial role feeding through local insights to rail partners: building mutual understanding of what's happening and what's needed, and ensuring communities and their needs are at the forefront. This has been drawing on community rail's local connections, with schools, businesses, transport providers and community groups, and shows how community rail can support continual, constructive dialogue through the recovery phases.

## Community rail's role in recovery and renewal

All our members are different, and, naturally, are responding to Covid-19 in different ways, attentive to their strengths and what's needed and appropriate in their area. Some are also dealing with particular challenges that constrain their responses.

The below outline of community rail's potential role in recovery and renewal does not aim to tell our members what to, nor to stymie innovation, attention to local needs, or diversity of responses. It instead aims to showcase some of the key ways that community rail can play (and is already playing) a fundamental role in achieving a green, just recovery and building back better. We hope this will help us and our members convey to local and national partners what they can do, and to promote collaboration and good practice; after all, this draws and builds on what members have already been doing, as well as conversations we've been having with partners on what's needed.

### 1. Local understanding, communications and dialogue

- Assisting rail partners with locally-nuanced communications about using rail, including when and if to travel (or not unless essential) in light of local capacity and keeping safe;
- Engaging community partners, such as schools, colleges, hospitals, businesses, attractions and service providers (especially where there are existing links) to understand their recovery plans and needs in relation to rail, advise rail partners on these insights, and facilitate dialogue and coordination;
- Community rail may be able to support volunteer marshalling coordinated by Volunteering Matters and other local partners, to ensure railway stations are linked up with area-wide efforts to support safe and controlled movement of people. *The Community Rail Network is discussing this further with the national coordinator Volunteering Matters and railway partners, and will communicate specific opportunities to members.*

### 2. Community resilience, wellbeing and supporting vulnerable people

- Working with foodbanks, local charities and support groups to distribute food and provide support to vulnerable people, including as part of wider schemes;
- Promoting wellbeing and mental health and celebrating diversity, such as through online campaigns and art projects that connect with local identities and encourage togetherness, and supporting rail safety campaigns;
- Supporting local businesses, enterprises and community partners, such as by promoting their services/products, or directing them to opportunities/advice/funding sources.

### 3. Building positivity and connections, and gearing up to promoting rail again

- Strengthening and further developing local projects that promote access to and positivity about rail (e.g. rail confidence schemes, sustainable travel awareness) and partnerships (such as with schools, colleges, local groups, authorities and businesses) that enable joined-up working to promote and aid access to sustainable mobility;
- Discussing with and advising local authorities and transport partners how work to improve walking and cycling routes and facilities, and local bus and community transport services, can be well-connected with rail, to support integrated sustainable journeys;
- Gearing up to start promoting rail again, drawing on community rail's proven track record in this area, such as through online information, social media, a strong tourism offer and partnerships (tapping into interest in domestic, healthy, green tourism), strong media relations, and keeping positive stories going out on what community rail is doing.

### Let's keep sharing

This is not a comprehensive list of all the ways that community rail can contribute: we continue to face many uncertainties, and so ongoing dialogue and innovation, especially at local level, is key. **We encourage our members and partners to continue to feed through examples of good practice, and ideas for stepping up impact, to [news@communityrail.org.uk](mailto:news@communityrail.org.uk).** We will continue to share examples across our network, and add to this overview with any new areas emerging.