

How can community rail support Covid-19 recovery and building back better?



Community rail is more important now than ever, to aid the recovery of our communities and their vital railways and sustainable transport links.

This briefing shows the ways that community rail partnerships and station groups can work with rail industry, local government and community partners to negotiate the challenging months ahead to restore use of our railways and strengthen our communities.

Challenges and opportunities:

Covid-19 has caused much detriment to our communities and our railways, and we continue to face great uncertainty. Rail use is down and car use back up. Some areas face renewed restrictions, and we have just entered recession. The climate crisis is ever more pressing, with transport the biggest contributor.

Yet opportunities have opened up:

- communities have pulled together, to support vulnerable people and strengthen their local areas
- people have seen the benefits of less traffic and pollution, and more walking and cycling
- so many of us recognise the importance of building back better, greener and fairer

Since the pandemic hit, community rail has adapted, supporting local resilience, engaging communities, volunteers and partners online, maintaining togetherness, and looking to the future.

Community rail partnerships and groups are eager to do as much as they can to help communities, rail, government and partners to cope with challenges and seize opportunities.

As their umbrella body, we are here to support that, working with strategic partners such as DfT and devolved governments, Rail Delivery Group, Network Rail, RSSB, and our alliance of **sustainable travel organisations**.

About community rail:

A growing, unique grassroots movement, connecting people with their railways and stations, delivering social, environmental, economic benefit.



Across Britain, we have:

72 community rail partnerships;
1,000 station friends groups;
9,000 volunteers.



It's evidenced to:

increase rail passenger growth;
enhance health, wellbeing & access to opportunity; influence behaviours & attitudes; support local place-making and regeneration.



What role can community rail play?

All our members are different, responding to what's needed locally. But in looking to our members' inspiring efforts, and consulting our partners, we identified three key areas where community rail can play (and is already playing) a fundamental role in a sustainable, inclusive recovery.

1. Local understanding, insights and dialogue

Community rail provides a link between our railways, local communities, service providers, employers and authorities: helping our rail partners to understand what's needed on the ground, how things are changing, local views, and feeding back to communities what's happening in rail. This is especially needed in a rapidly-changing, uncertain environment.

It's about asking questions, listening and responding in a nimble way, facilitating conversations, and encouraging collaboration and understanding. This can help everyone to focus in on local people and places and how the railways can best serve their needs.

This includes:

- Engaging community partners, schools, colleges, hospitals, businesses and attractions to understand their recovery plans and transport needs, advise rail partners on these insights, and facilitate dialogue and coordination between;
- Looking at how stations and lines are being used locally and how this could change, considering local perceptions, and emerging changes to work and travel patterns;
- Keeping tabs on messaging from local train/transport operators and authorities, reinforcing this at a local level, and building understanding;
- Forging and strengthening local partnerships, and helping partners connect with each other.

Government strategies:

Community rail supports the pillars of the DfT's **Community Rail Development Strategy**:

- Providing a voice
- Social inclusion and diversity
- Sustainable, healthy travel
- Local economic development

It's also recognised in the government's strategy on tackling loneliness, and is now feeding in to its transport decarbonisation plan.

Community rail supports the Welsh Government's Wellbeing of Future Generations Act and **Scottish Government's National Transport Strategy**.



Sussex CRP used its local links to facilitate understanding and dialogue between local schools, train operators and authorities, such as on the numbers of pupils travelling by train. They also worked with the schools to reassure and support pupils on safe rail travel, and continue to support families on sustainable travel planning. [Read more.](#)

2. Community resilience, wellbeing and inclusion

Community rail works to make our railways as inclusive as possible, brings people together and bolsters local pride and wellbeing. Through Covid, many have been responding to what communities need and supporting local resilience efforts, and this will continue. Many station friends are starting to resume activities, enabling healthy, wellbeing-boosting volunteering.

Wellbeing, mental health, local economies, and disadvantaged groups have been badly affected by Covid-19, so attention to these issues is critical, and this can help to rebuild confidence about rail too. This work includes:

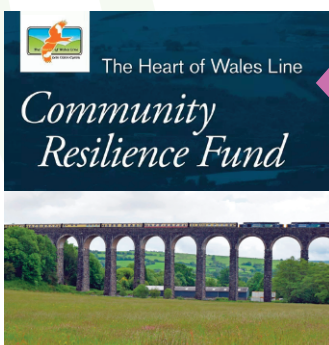
- Partnering with voluntary organisations, charities, groups and foodbanks to support vulnerable people or meet local needs, including drawing on community rail facilities (e.g. station gardens or cafes), volunteers, and our expertise on mobility;
- Supporting local businesses and enterprises, such as promoting their services/products, or directing them to opportunities/advice/funding;
- Station friends volunteering at stations, benefiting their wellbeing and health, community cohesion, and making stations welcoming, heartening places;
- Promoting wellbeing and mental health and celebrating diversity, such as through online campaigns and art projects that connect with local identities and encourage togetherness;
- Helping disadvantaged groups or those with particular needs to feel able and confident using rail to access work, education and leisure opportunities.



One in three adults don't have personal access to a car,* so helping people to feel confident and able to use public transport and active travel is crucial to access to work, training, services & social opportunities.

***Nat Cen & UWE, 2019**

Community rail has a crucial role working with children and young people to help them build confidence and skills, and access opportunities through sustainable, healthy travel. **See our youth engagement report.**



Heart of Wales Line worked with local voluntary associations to set up a small grants fund for community groups within 10km of stations on their line, drawing on support from Transport for Wales. This recognised that small amounts could make a big difference to enabling these groups – whose activities are crucial to inclusion and wellbeing – to 'weather the storm', and it's helping the CRP to build local links. **Read more.**

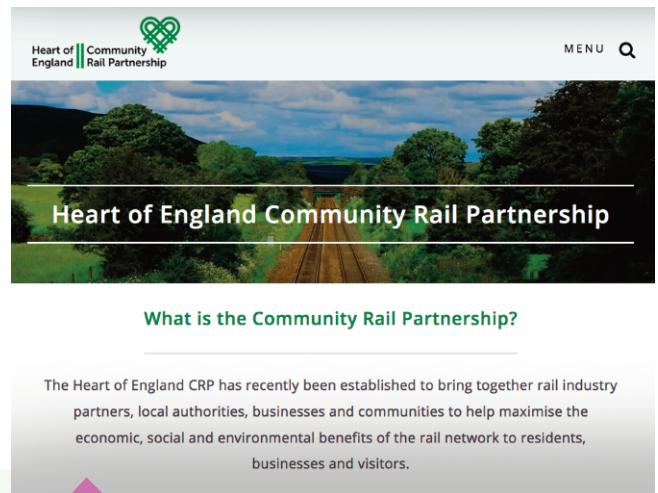
3. Building positivity and promoting rail and sustainable travel

Promoting rail travel, through local awareness, positivity and confidence, is a big part of what community rail is here to do, and it has a proven track record. This is more important now than ever. Through the pandemic, 'do not travel' messages have taken effect, with rail use at 30% the usual (Aug '20). Road traffic has bounced back up, with the resultant pollution, noise, danger and disturbance. At the same time, the climate crisis looms large, and governments acknowledge the importance of public transport in addressing this.

Promoting rail use for leisure and tourism is likely to be especially important, with increased homeworking, and opportunities to tap into demand for staycationing and healthy, outdoor leisure.

Community rail's vital part in all this includes:

- Restarting and reinvigorating promotion of rail, for leisure, tourism and sustainable mobility, through online information, social media, a strong leisure and tourism offer and partnerships, media relations, and pushing out positive community rail stories;
- Championing the work being done by rail partners to make rail safe, clean, inclusive and reliable;
- Strengthening initiatives and partnerships that promote access to and awareness about rail and sustainable travel (e.g. rail confidence, travel planning and station projects), working with schools, colleges, groups, local authorities and businesses;
- Advising local authorities and transport partners how work taking place to improve walking and cycling can be well-connected with rail (and public and community transport more widely), to support integrated sustainable journeys.



Heart of England CRP has created a new website, with a focus on promoting the railway and the CRP as positive, proactive and community-orientated. They have used the site, and their social media channels, to research and build links with local partners and businesses, and to encourage people to get in touch and get involved. They are also empowering volunteers along the line to promote their activities at stations.

[Read more.](#)



Transport is now the biggest contributor of greenhouse gasses, mostly from cars. The DfT has committed to making public transport and active travel the 'natural first choice' to address this, and deliver a wealth of co-benefits. [See DfT's Decarbonising Transport.](#)

Talk to us – and let's keep sharing

Community Rail Network offers advice and support to its members and partners on any of these areas of work and the development of community rail. Contact [the team](#) or see [our resources](#) or [events](#). We also encourage members and partners to feed through good practice examples and ideas to news@communityrail.org.uk, so we can share across our network.



Community rail can help rail to connect well with buses, walking and cycling, and bring transport partners together. [See our toolkit on community-led station travel planning.](#)



Community rail is ideally placed to promote travel confidence and enable sustainable travel behaviours. It is evidenced to enhance passenger growth over the years. This tallies with research showing that localised, community-led approaches are key to sustainable behaviours. [See Value of Community Rail.](#)



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