Community rail and sustainable development

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Introduction

Community rail is a grassroots movement that engages local people and aims to help them derive social, economic, and environmental value from their railways, while advising industry partners on local needs.

Our evidence on the impact being delivered through community rail suggests it has a natural affinity with supporting sustainable development, and there are suggestions that this influence is growing.

This report explores how railways and stations can stimulate sustainable development at community level, and how community rail can play a key role in that.

It looks at opportunities for developing collaborative working between the railways, communities, and wider partners to help rail to play a maximum role in sustainable development, especially against a backdrop of rail transformation and transport decarbonisation over the coming years.

This is the second in a series of three sustainability-related reports sponsored by Rail Delivery Group. It follows '**Community rail: encouraging and enabling modal shift**',[1] which highlights how empowering communities to travel through sustainable and healthy means, including a shift away from car use, can bring benefits for local people, places, and our climate.

The final report will focus on community rail's role in enhancing environmental sustainability via biodiversity, gardening, and wildlife projects, developing stations as green spaces offering multiple benefits to communities and ecosystems.

What is sustainable development?

> " Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. "[2]

The United Nations frame the concept of sustainable development as one that is based on three interdependent and mutually reinforcing pillars, of economic development, social development, and environmental protection.[3] They are supported by green and inclusive principles, in a holistic approach that encourages a safer, more resilient, equitable and sustainable society.

> " Sustainable development is about finding better ways of doing things, both for the future and the present.[4] "

Principles of sustainable development: [5]

- Economic development – building strong, sufficient, and sustainable local economies that support innovation and development;

- Social development – nurturing social inclusion and vibrant, healthy communities, where accessible local services reflect local needs and support health, social and cultural wellbeing;

- Environmental sustainability – protecting and enhancing the environment, improving biodiversity, using resources wisely, minimising waste/pollution, adapting behaviours to help tackle the climate emergency.

Sustainable development – *adapted from Poverty-Environment Partnership 2012.* [6]

Communities can combine resilience with the capacity to be innovative and adaptable, resulting in a sense of 'community vitality' that some researchers have highlighted as a 'cornerstone' of sustainable development.[7] These characteristics can be seen within community rail, where partnerships and groups use flexible and innovative approaches, often working with multiple partners, to create opportunities and identify solutions to local issues.

Due to the importance of involving communities, sustainable development projects are often designed to incorporate public participation, allowing people to shape positive changes, resulting in increased equality and empowerment alongside economic and environmental benefits.[8] Given community rail is a grassroots movement, and partnerships and groups are deep-rooted in the communities they serve, they inherently take a place-based approach. Local needs are placed at the heart of initiatives, with social inclusion and community development aims often intertwined with environmental improvements.

Research suggests that if sustainability is to be achieved on a broader scale, community-level activity is key, with sustainable communities working to embrace and enact economic, social, and environmental change.

Sustainable development and rail

Rail Sustainable Development Principles:

RSSB's Rail Sustainable Development Principles contain some that equate directly to the principles of sustainable development outlined above, namely:

- **Supporting the economy** – boosting the productivity and competitiveness of the UK, at a national and regional level, through efficient services and by catalysing economic regeneration (economic development);

- **Having a positive social impact** – focusing on local impacts and communities through better understanding and engagement (social development);

- **Reducing our environmental impact** – operating and improving the business in a way that minimises the negative impacts and maximises the benefits of the railway to the environment (environmental sustainability).

Under those principles, key elements relating to sustainable development include:

Economic development	Social development	Environmental sustainability
Rail playing a key role in regeneration, and generating economic benefits in regions throughout the UK	Rail engaging in and aligning with local development plans, ensuring community needs are met	Rail protecting and enhancing biodiversity corridors, and developing green spaces in and around stations
Rail working directly with local businesses and social enterprises to support their development	Stations evolving beyond just transport to become 'hubs' at the heart of the communities they serve	Rail adopting a sustainable 'reduce, re-use, recycle' approach to design and resource/asset management
Rail offering opportunities for sustainable tourism, bringing increased levels of visitors and spending into local economies	Rail venturing directly into communities, engaging local partners in the developmental process	Rail following green infrastructure, e.g. to reduce emissions, to positively impact on health and quality of life

Forming part of the new 30-year Whole Industry Strategic Plan for rail, RSSB is now developing a Sustainable Rail Strategy to embed sustainable development principles into the industry, providing a long-term plan to establish rail as the backbone of a greener, sustainable future transport system.[9]

Sustainable development and rail reform:

The Department for Transport's (DfT) **Great British Railways - The Williams-Shapps Plan for Rail**[10] signals the beginning of significant reforms for the rail industry, with our railways set to become more inclusive, accessible, sustainable, and responsive to local needs and opportunities. Again, the key principles of sustainable development are central to the plan, with examples including:

Economic development	Social development	Environmental sustainability
Improved engagement with local businesses and communities, encouraging them to invest in and help manage stations	Reusing rail buildings for services such as training, community hubs, education, and health and wellbeing, to improve services for local residents	Improved connectivity for active travel and public transport, allowing seamless 'door-to-door' journeys
Encouraging small retailers/enterprises on the rail estate, e.g. new commercial spaces at stations, support for new start-ups	Making stations more welcoming, accessible, and inclusive, and integrating them with wider developments and transport services	Decarbonising transport to reduce emissions, including encouraging and enabling modal shift from road to rail
Opportunities for innovators and suppliers (including small, local partners) in new service contracts	Rail facilitating social connections to tackle loneliness and social isolation	Commitment to a comprehensive rail environment plan in 2022
Rail acting as a catalyst in placemaking, regeneration and development	Improved facilities and services for rail users with hidden disabilities	Sustainable approach to rail estate management, to protect and enhance the natural environment, and buildings, e.g. energy efficiency, reduced water consumption
Reinvigorating rail travel for leisure and tourism, to maximise recovery from the pandemic		Commitment to clean energy and renewable power generation, e.g. solar power

In the **Transport Decarbonisation Plan** (TDP), [11] the DfT sets out the government's commitments and actions needed to decarbonise the entire transport system in the UK. Alongside this, it also published its **Rail Environment Policy Statement.**[12] They set directions for the rail industry on environmental sustainability, and outline policy priorities for the Sustainable Rail Strategy, due in 2022. Sustainable development principles are demonstrated within the documents, including:

Economic development	Social development	Environmental sustainability
Reviewing planning procedures to promote sustainable transport, making communities more accessible, inclusive, safe, and attractive as well as promoting the concept of 20-minute neighbourhoods	Developing Local Transport Plans, helping to transform stations into 'joined-up mobility hubs' within local transport networks	Enabling modal shift through improved connectivity between rail and active travel/public transport, integrated ticketing, and communications to encourage sustainable transport behaviours
Promoting rail for short and long-distance travel, and for work and leisure journeys. Encouraging customers to return in 'larger numbers than ever', reinvigorating local areas and economies	Principles of social value to be embedded across the rail network, increasing the value provided to passengers and communities	More high-quality walking and cycling routes to/from stations, and better facilities at stations to encourage active/shared travel
	Local communities act as partners to help develop rail, with stations positioned as vital local centres of social and economic activity, and beacons for sustainability	Decarbonising traction and the rail estate
		Developing procedures to generate clean energy, improve air quality, nurture biodiversity, reduce waste and water use

Sustainable stations:

In its '**Vision for Stations**',[13] Rail Delivery Group (RDG) outlines its core principles for stations, including ensuring "stations are managed in a manner which ensures their long term economic, environmental and social sustainability." This aligns with the key principles of sustainable development, with stations described as "precious resources" that can "underpin the social fabric of local communities."

RDG's **Sustainable Stations Best Practice Guide** [14] considers how stations can play their part in the government's commitment to deliver net-zero emissions by 2050. The focus is on environmental sustainability, showcasing exemplar projects in areas such as: biodiversity and green spaces; energy, carbon, and water management; waste management and recycling; and monitoring and improving air quality. The guidance also highlights the social aspect of sustainable development, recognising the contribution of community rail in ensuring that stations reflect the identities and needs of communities.

Also considered within the guide are the principles behind station design, and how the role of stations is evolving, particularly as we recover from COVID-19. It talks of stations increasingly becoming destinations in their own right, attracting footfall from beyond the railway. It highlights stations as potential mixed-use, multi-purpose sites where people can use community facilities, shops, or flexible working spaces, all initiatives that facilitate social interactions and sustainable economic development.

All train operators have pledged to use the guide to make stations more sustainable, in combination with **Network Rail's Environmental Sustainability Strategy**,[15] which cites improved biodiversity, minimal waste, and sustainable use of materials among its key priorities.

Sustainable design principles also underpin the 'future' stations discussed in Network Rail's '**Think Station**' [16] report with the Design Council, and its '**Tomorrow's Living Station**' [17] report with ARUP. The documents talk about the potential for stations to deliver:

- Economic benefits – e.g. making connections between stations and town centres/high streets, supporting local businesses, offering flexible space for shared business use;

- Social benefits – e.g. engaging with communities to establish opportunities and needs, providing social spaces, developing stations as focal points for community wellbeing;

- Environmental benefits – e.g. enhancing and providing access to green spaces, supporting active travel, developing access to sustainable multi-modal transport.

Sustainable development and community rail:

The principles of sustainable development are interwoven throughout the **Community Rail Development Strategy**,[18] and its four pillars:

- Providing a voice for the community;

- Promoting sustainable, healthy, and accessible travel;

- Bringing communities together and supporting diversity and inclusion;

- Supporting social and economic development.

Examples of community rail activity linked to sustainable development include:

Economic development	Social development	Environmental sustainability
Promoting and enhancing tourism and leisure travel by train, helping to support local economies	Offering opportunities for volunteering and social interaction, and for people to play a role in place-making and improving their localities	Bringing sustainable transport partners together to facilitate multi-modal journeys, linking rail with buses, walking, and cycling
Supporting small businesses and social enterprise, via promotional and partnership work and railway-related enterprises	Building travel confidence, skills and knowledge among children, young people and those who face mobility barriers	Promoting active travel, e.g. walking/cycling, for leisure, and as the 'first and last mile' of regular shorter journeys
Supporting or advising on local development opportunities linked to the railways, such as infrastructure enhancements or connections with new housing	Ensuring communities have a voice and are included as meaningful partners in the design and delivery of local transport projects	Encouraging sustainable travel behaviours, e.g. modal shift from road to rail, to reduce emissions and congestion and improve air quality, health and wellbeing
Working with rail partners to identify opportunities to improve and extend rail services and the rail network, e.g. helping to evaluate business cases	Broadening the role of stations to offer more services to, and space for, local communities, creating community hubs and developing cohesion	Using local knowledge to develop initiatives such as station travel plans to enhance integrated local transport networks, ensuring rail is central to such plans
Working with heritage railways to support such lines as tourism attractions	Engaging young people to benefit their mobility and draw on their creativity and ideas	Nurturing station environments as havens for biodiversity and local wildlife, and adopting sustainable working practices for activities such as station adoption

Organisations can be seen to add social value when they make a positive contribution to the long-term wellbeing and resilience of individuals, communities, and society in general.[19] By that definition, social value and sustainable development are intrinsically interlinked. The **Williams-Shapps Plan for Rail**[20] states that community rail partnerships and groups play an important role in supporting Britain's rail network, engaging with partners, strengthening railway initiatives with local understanding, and improving rail's social impact.

The government also states that the principles of social value should be embedded across the rail network, increasing the value provided to passengers and communities. This is the essence of the community rail movement, and we know from research such as our '**Value of community rail report**'[21] that the movement is, for example: facilitating more inclusive, cohesive and connected communities, including delivering a 'place-making' role; engaging disadvantaged groups in their railways; exerting a positive influence on wider regeneration and community development; and offering a range of, in some cases, life-changing opportunities. Community Rail Network is actively working to support our members in embedding social value principles across their work, looking at the impact and positive contribution they are making.

The following sections will consider in greater depth community rail activities linked to the principles of sustainable development, giving examples of where community rail partnerships and groups are making positive contributions.

Adopting eco-friendly practices and behaviours:

While creating sustainable transport networks and travel behaviours is undoubtedly key to combatting the climate emergency, community rail partnerships and groups can also promote sustainable development, particularly environmental aspects, via sustainable practices and methods in their work and station-based activities. RDG's **Sustainable Stations Guide** [22] points to stations acting as 'beacons of sustainability' in their communities, and there are examples within community rail of this, as groups work in partnership to improve facilities and develop eco-friendly schemes to do with energy production, water conservation, and recycling.

Some community rail partnerships and groups are starting to develop new approaches to reducing emissions on their local lines and stations, such as the use of solar power to increase energy efficiency. As well as reducing financial outlay, this can improve station environments for passengers and reinforce perceptions of rail as a green way to travel. In Devon, the Avocet Line Rail Users Group worked with the Devon and Cornwall Rail Partnership to install innovative **solar-powered illuminated poster cases** at three stations between Exmouth and Exeter. Supplied by a company local to the line, the project marked the first time such cases had been used at stations, making them more attractive and welcoming to passengers, with zero energy costs. Transwilts Community Rail Partnership are similarly planning to install solar-powered noticeboards at stations on the line from Swindon to Westbury.
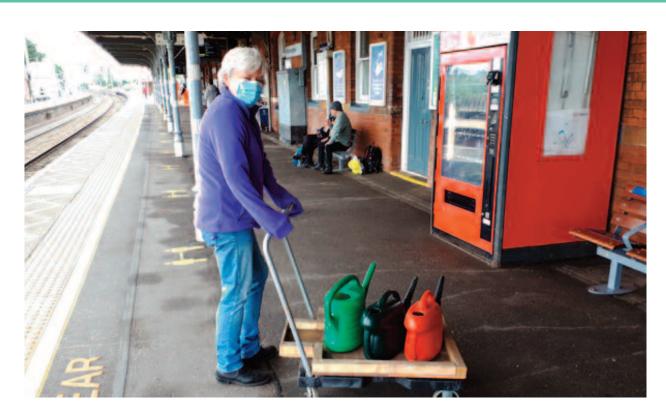
Essex and South Suffolk Community Rail Partnership, working with Greater Anglia and Community Rail Network, installed solar-powered LED cats' eyes on a walkway at Chappel & Wakes Colne Station, on the branch line between Sudbury and Marks Tey. Turning what was a dark entrance into a clear, safe path, the project used a renewable energy source and aligned with the train operator's commitment to reducing its carbon footprint. The same lights were installed at Whittlesea Station in Cambridgeshire, involving Greater Anglia and Hereward Community Rail Partnership.

Community rail partnerships and groups have also helped to develop sustainable water management and conservation methods at stations. Station gardens and/or green spaces need regular watering, and improvements such as the provision of water butts at stations has made an impact on sustainable planting and improved conditions for volunteers involved in gardening and biodiversity projects across the network.

CASE STUDY: Eco-friendly water solutions in Essex

Rail station gardens across Essex received a boost with the installation of permanent and eco-friendly water supplies to help keep plants in perfect condition.

Essex and South Suffolk Community Rail Partnership and Community Rail Network, working with Greater Anglia, funded the installation of water butts or new taps at eight stations – Clacton, Cressing, Hythe, Manningtree, Rayleigh, Sudbury, Weeley, and Wivenhoe – to solve the problem of keeping them watered in one of the driest parts of the country.

At seven of the stations, rainwater is collected in butts via the station or waiting shelter gutters, creating an environmentally friendly alternative to using a mains supply, saving water, and providing an onsite supply throughout the year. One water butt holds enough to fill up a watering can 25 times.

Station adopters across Greater Anglia increased the total area of station garden across the network by 14% in 2020, transforming an area of land equivalent to that of five Olympic-sized swimming pools into thriving green spaces.

Station layout and design can also help to promote sustainability by setting an example and showing what can be achieved with eco-friendly building approaches and practices. At Llandeilo, a sustainable and transportable station 'hub' was developed for use by local community groups or small businesses as a site to develop local enterprise projects. As the first project of its kind, the design featured a rainwater harvesting system and renewable energy unit to create a stand-alone, multi-purpose mini-building suited for unstaffed rural stations.

At Accrington, the station has been developed as an 'eco-station' with solar panels installed on both lighting columns in its car park and on the station roof. The panels can produce 30% of the electricity the station needs and so can reduce carbon emissions by over three tonnes every year for the next 25 years. Given its green design, the station provides an ideal base for the education programmes run by Community Rail Lancashire, whose staff promote the environmental benefits of rail travel to hundreds of young people every year.

Many community rail partnerships and community station groups have worked to bring redundant and disused buildings back into use to reinvigorate station and rail environments. A range of examples can be found in our 'Community Stations: innovative community uses for railway stations and land' report.[23]   In some cases, these projects incorporate elements of a 'circular economy' approach. Such initiatives are used for community benefit, or to promote new business or enterprise opportunities, keeping things local and providing space for communities to share and develop ideas.[24]

A circular economy – what is it?

A circular economy is one that is restorative and regenerative by design, in which resources are used in a manner that creates the maximum value without other detrimental knock-on effects. This represents a move away from a 'take, make, dispose' approach.[25] A circular economy is based on:

- Minimising waste and pollution, e.g. reducing greenhouse gas and carbon emissions, air pollution, waste water;

- Keeping products and materials in use, e.g. recycling to keep products, components, and materials circulating in the economy, with resources reused, repurposed, or redeployed wherever possible;

- Regenerating natural systems, e.g. avoiding the use of non-renewable resources, using renewable energy sources.[26]

Even with relatively small-scale projects, taking a circular economy approach can make organisations more resilient to climate change, and help to contribute to wider climate targets. It can also lead to greater economic stability, through increased resource security and new business and employment opportunities,[27] and help create physical infrastructure that supports local production and can be accessible for community-based initiatives.[28]

CASE STUDY: Haltwhistle Station

Tyne Valley Community Rail Partnership has led on a £500k project to revive the redundant buildings at Haltwhistle Station, transforming them for passenger and community use.

The wooden buildings, which date back to the 1900s, have retained their original features wherever possible, and been treated with great care as they are transformed into versatile spaces suited for the 21st century.

To reduce energy consumption and ensure the buildings could be occupied and operated in a sustainable manner, the partnership acquired and installed PV panels for the roofs of both buildings. This offers an environmentally friendly source of power and aligns with the partnership's objective to minimise its carbon footprint across all projects and activities.

The buildings are set to offer sustainable, affordable, and flexible office or studio space for small businesses and/or new start-ups in the Haltwhistle area, alongside improved waiting rooms for passengers.

The partnership hopes that the project will play a positive role in the sustainable regeneration of the town and wider area, leading to an increase in rail use and greater community involvement.

Engaging communities and young people:

Railways and stations are also becoming 'beacons' of sustainability locally via community-led projects promoting sustainable practice and behaviours. Alongside highlighting the benefits of sustainable and healthy travel, community rail schemes demonstrate the importance of caring for the environment in other ways, often working with partners such as schools and community groups to help amplify green messages.

Projects that promote sustainability can help to develop the sense of place that research indicates is critical to sustainable development, with people enthused and engaged in the process of building the type of communities they want to live in.[29] This can be magnified by the involvement of young people, for whom the environment is often an important and emotive issue.[30] Supporting young people to become informed, active local citizens by playing a bigger role in looking after the physical fabric of their neighbourhoods can be an important step in developing their decision-making skills, and in securing the long-term social and environmental benefits of green communities by enthusing young people as their future custodians and champions.[31]

For example, the Penistone Line Partnership worked with the engineering and construction company AmcoGiffen to hold an online competition for schools to encourage thinking about innovation for future green energy for the UK's rail network. The best submissions were converted into designs which now adorn eight new **art and information boards** at Honley Station. The panels all have different themes, including green building design, recycling, green transport, the environment, smart technology, and communities, combined with information for passengers on future technology and how they can help their local railway and station become more sustainable.

Another project engaging young people on sustainability is the 'Fantastic Recycled Plastic' scheme, being developed by Community Rail Lancashire. The partnership is working with Newfield School in Blackburn, which caters for pupils with differing physical and educational needs, in developing a community-based art project using recyclable plastic milk bottles. The bottles will be melted down and made into tiles for a piece of artwork to go on display at Blackburn Station and the school. Alongside promoting sustainability and rail travel among the school and the wider community, the project complements the school's Life Skills curriculum, where pupils are supported to use public transport with confidence.

Further reading: Community rail and youth engagement

Our exploration of **'Youth engagement in rail'** has examples of the movement engaging with young people to build inclusive and cohesive communities and add value to society.

Promoting social sustainability:

In recent years, social sustainability has gained increased recognition as a fundamental part of sustainable development,[32] on a par with economic and environmental aspects, recognising that communities are as much social environments as they are physical environments.[33]

Sustainable social development involves the nurturing of vibrant, diverse, cohesive communities, where accessible and inclusive services reflect local needs, support health, social and cultural wellbeing, and improve quality of life.[34] This is underpinned by the direct involvement of communities in stimulating change.

Localised approaches and interactive engagement support people to make change together, and many studies propose that this kind of community empowerment naturally produces more sustainable forms of development.[35] Participation helps to build social capital within communities, strengthening those communities and encouraging and enabling collaborative approaches on sustainability.[36]

Aspects of social sustainability can be seen in a wide range of typical community rail activities, including:

- Creative/heritage projects that bring people together, stimulate self-expression, and reflect community pride or identity;

- Community rail volunteering, developing friendships and improved physical and mental wellbeing;

- Initiatives that tackle loneliness and social isolation, using rail as a vehicle to enable and promote companionship and social interactions;

- Activities designed to make rail, and rail travel, more inclusive and accessible, removing barriers for marginalised individuals or groups;

- Stations acting as community hubs, offering welcoming environments for projects aligned with community needs;

- Youth engagement projects, giving young people a voice and empowering them to make positive contributions.

Further reading: Community rail and social inclusion

Examples can be found in our 'Community rail and social inclusion' report, highlighting how community rail makes rail more accessible, connects people to opportunities, provides spaces for social growth and volunteering, and engages communities through arts and heritage. Our 'Value of community rail' report also discusses how community rail facilitates inclusion and access to a social railway.

Working with rail partners, community rail has delivered ground-breaking projects to promote social sustainability within rail and beyond, such as the Leeds-Morecambe Community Rail Partnership creating Britain's first-ever 'dementia-friendly' railway, by adapting station environments, training staff, running trips for those living with the condition, and raising awareness of dementia among the wider railway community. Community Rail Lancashire meanwhile helped to develop the first 'autism-friendly' line, opening up rail as an inclusive travel option.

Several community rail partnerships and groups now use activities on trains to facilitate social interactions, supporting those who may feel isolated. For example, Severnside Community Rail Partnership run special services including 'Chatty Trains' or 'Games on a Train', introducing communities and individuals less familiar with rail to local services and stations. Rail 74 Community Rail Partnership in Glasgow host 'conversation cafes' on trains to reduce social isolation, promoting rail as a form of sociable and sustainable travel, and the Devon and Cornwall Rail Partnership run 'Creativitea Trains', inter-generational tea parties on the train that evoke memories of the railway and spark conversations and sharing.

Community rail also supports the resilience of communities, using local knowledge to address specific social issues and needs, thus increasing social capital. Recent examples range from the Penistone Line Partnership's 'Dwell Time' arts project, which seeks to address stigma around mental health, to the Isle of Wight Community Rail Partnership's 'Suit Yourself' initiative, a ten-week training programme supporting women back into employment. The importance of projects like these is likely to increase in the near future, as communities rebuild from the effects of the pandemic and adapt to new social conditions.

CASE STUDY: Community rail supporting communities during COVID-19

When the pandemic hit, community rail adapted, supported local resilience, continued to engage with communities, volunteers, and partners, and maintained togetherness, looking to the future. In their local areas, many community rail partnerships and station groups supported social sustainability projects including:

- The Heart of Wales Development Company set up a 'community resilience' small grants fund for community groups within 10km of stations on their line, supporting projects promoting social inclusion and wellbeing. A similar fund was established on the Cambrian Line, and South West Wales Connected launched a new 'Community Changemakers' fund to support post-COVID regeneration schemes;

- Several groups supported projects organising and distributing food and other supplies for vulnerable people, including the Lymington to Brockenhurst and Isle of Wight partnerships who coordinated food parcels via the 'Food on the Move' scheme, Borders Community Rail Partnership who supported older people, young families, and isolated individuals, and East Midlands Railway, who with the Derwent Valley Line, North Staffordshire, and Poacher Line partnerships, and the Friends of Beeston Station, donated funds to local food banks;

- On the South Fylde Line in Lancashire, volunteers made much-needed scrubs and bags for their local hospital, Blackpool Victoria, as well as other medical centres and care homes;

- Partnerships including Severnside and Southeast Communities Rail Partnership developed resources to help pupils return to school and travel safely by rail;

- On the West Highland Line, where a limited timetable was in operation, the community rail partnership worked with ScotRail to advise on a special bi-weekly service train from Rannoch to Fort William, giving people living in isolated communities the chance to travel to the town for essential purposes such as shopping and medical appointments.

Stations becoming community hubs:

In providing the base for much community rail activity, stations are evolving into sites that offer more services to, and space for, local communities, creating true community hubs. Recent research indicates that hubs of this kind are key to developing the 'social infrastructure' that makes communities good places to live and are integral to the wider sustainable development of an area. This can include providing spaces that help people to broaden their networks and foster a sense of belonging, support people into employment, education, or training, bring together people from different walks of life, and offer opportunities for improved health and wellbeing.[37]

All these elements can be found in community rail activity at stations, not least in station adoption, which brings together thousands of volunteers across Britain around shared passions and interests. Stations are increasingly being adopted by a more diverse range of groups, including schools, colleges, charities, and other community groups, with gardening and arts and heritage projects bringing different elements of the community together, strengthening community bonds. For example, Kent Community Rail Partnership works with **Sheppey College** to adopt stations on the SwaleRail Line, and with the Five Acre Wood project, which supports students with additional educational needs, to adopt Snodland Station, all providing avenues for young people to express themselves socially and creatively.

As stations grow beyond purely transport sites, the facilities on offer can stimulate social activity that opens up opportunities for people to broaden their networks and increase their skills. The new community enterprise hub at Llandudno Station is set to host a digital skills training programme for volunteers, helping local people access employment. On the New River Line, the community rail partnership works with Mudlarks, a charity involving adults with learning disabilities, in adopting Hertford East Station, supporting potential routes into employment via gardening projects.

In our '**Value of community rail**' report,[38] we explored' the notion of stations acting as bases of positive social change, and of community rail aiding rehabilitation. This has been demonstrated at Kilmarnock Station, where the Kilmarnock Station Railway Heritage Trust brought redundant spaces back into community use, and now works with groups and individuals to tackle problems such as low-level mental health issues, addiction, and loneliness. The Trust receives referrals from a range of different agencies, such as the NHS and addiction services, which helps to shape its 'social prescribing', whole-community recovery approach. Similar values underpin the Cumbrian Coast Line Community Rail Partnership's '**Rail Journey to Recovery**' project, which uses rail and station adoption activities to support the rehabilitation of people with addiction issues, building self-esteem and fostering social interactions that help them re-engage with society.

CASE STUDY: Petersfield and Swaythling 'free shops'

A key priority for both the East Hampshire and Three Rivers community rail partnerships is working with South Western Railway to develop disused rooms and buildings at stations for community use, providing social value and promoting sustainable development.

In what was the old parcels office at Petersfield Station, East Hampshire Community Rail Partnership has created a regular 'free shop' that redistributes food that would otherwise have been wasted, including to local charities during the COVID-19 lockdown. The scheme has proved a success with locals and has begun operating on Saturdays too in response to demand. It has also evolved to offer second-hand school uniforms, supporting local families.

Three Rivers Community Rail Partnership also established a 'free shop' at Swaythling Station, to reduce waste and support those in need. Groceries are provided to people without any form of means testing, and if any food remains unused, it is passed on to a local Sunday lunch club. The partnership is exploring other potential uses for the space, including a weekly surgery on debt advice.

Both projects, which are primarily staffed by local volunteers, have made real differences to families and individuals, and demonstrate how community rail and stations can offer vital support to those in need, stimulating positive change.

Expert comment: The Plunkett Foundation

The 'multi-service hub' is a model that is common within the community business sector, with many projects aiming to create impactful and inclusive spaces through innovative forms of business. Often, the aim is to offer 'more than' what the core activity might be more traditionally seen as. Ongoing consultation is used to define the services most important to the community, and this feeds into business planning, considering the potential for the wider integration of services.

Within the community shop network, a growing trend is to integrate a café or some other form of hireable social meeting space. This generates additional income for the business, while enhancing the social fabric of the community through an environment that brings people together.

There are a growing number of examples of community businesses co-locating with other enterprises, within other community assets such as churches, village and community halls, sports clubs, and libraries, or sharing space within parish/town council offices.

A station building can of course be used to replicate this multi-service provision model. **The Strawberry Line Café** at Yatton Station is a great example of how this can work: a not-for-profit enterprise that serves passengers while offering employment and training opportunities to people with learning disabilities.

Further reading: Community rail and local business

'**The socially enterprising railway**', our toolkit for developing social enterprise in a railway environment, outlines the concept of social enterprise within community rail, as well as providing guidance in business planning, engaging partners, marketing and finance, and a range of case studies.

The Plunkett Foundation's '**Vision for a COVID-19 rural recovery**' considers the role of community-ownership and local provision of services as the UK recovers from the pandemic.

Supporting local economies:

Sustainable economic development is underpinned by the creation of strong local economies. By taking a place-based and locally empowering approach, resilient economies can develop to maximise the value of local assets, while benefitting society and protecting the environment. In this way, businesses and social enterprises can be encouraged to set up and grow, organisations can share knowledge and intelligence, innovation can flourish, and a diverse mix of businesses and initiatives can thrive.[39]

Having local businesses providing local solutions also fosters a culture whereby people feel empowered and more inclined to support their local economies, making them more sustainable. This is shown by the success of movements such as Totally Locally, which campaigns for independent high streets and businesses in towns across the UK and worldwide.[40]

This ethos complements the values of community rail, and there are various examples of projects that support economic development and regeneration locally. Examples include:

- Working with and promoting local businesses to boost trade;

- Supporting station-based businesses and initiatives, and developing stations to offer flexible space for business use;

- Improving the wider environment around stations and increasing mobility, such as via connections between rail, buses, walking and cycling, supporting wider regeneration;

- Boosting the economic sustainability of communities by rail tourism, bringing people into local areas to use local businesses and services.

Many community rail partnerships and groups support and promote local businesses, and this is likely to be even more crucial as local economies recover from COVID-19 and face the challenges of an increasingly unstable climate. The pandemic spurred many groups into action, including the Friends of Buxton Station, who got involved in the 'Buxton Kickstart' recovery campaign and developed a **Rail Retail Trail**. Others have developed long-standing arrangements with local

suppliers, such as the Settle-Carlisle Community Rail Partnership, which supports economies along the line by working with local businesses on catering, marketing, and merchandising.

CASE STUDY: Devon and Cornwall Rail Partnership supporting local economic development

Devon and Cornwall Rail Partnership enhances economic development in a range of ways, including collaborations that directly support local businesses.

When COVID-19 hit, the partnership developed and promoted trails of book and record shops along its lines, encouraging communities to continue to support them, shopping online during lockdown and in person when possible. It also ran campaigns to highlight pasty shops across Cornwall, independent shops on its branch lines that could provide Christmas gifts, and station cafes on the Tarka Line.

The promotions followed previous campaigns such as:

- Working with shops and restaurants in Looe to create a 'Pirate Trail', which helped to boost footfall for some businesses by 20 per cent;

- Producing 'Foodie Guides' for branch lines, highlighting food businesses along each route that champion local produce and sustainability;

- Supporting local pubs via 'Rail Ale Trails';

- Their 'Great Scenic Railways' website promoting the area to visitors and day-trippers, boosting economies via increased tourism spend while encouraging greener travel by rail.

CASE STUDY: Discount scheme for Norfolk rail passengers

A scheme to add value for rail passengers and support local businesses was launched in Norfolk for Summer 2021.

Rail passengers visiting Sheringham on the Bittern Line were able to enjoy discounts and offers in several local shops, eateries, and attractions thanks to a partnership between the Bittern Line Community Rail Partnership and Sheringham Chamber of Trade and Commerce.

Participating businesses displayed a yellow notice in their window and by showing a ticket or proof of travel, passengers could take advantage of the special rates on offer.

The initial scheme covered 35 businesses and attractions in the town – which has a wide range of independent small shops and traders – including museums, craft shops, and local heritage line the North Norfolk Railway.

Those behind the project hoped that its partnership approach would encourage people to support local businesses, in turn stimulating local economies post COVID-19 and promoting sustainable travel and tourism by rail.

There are plans to expand the project over time, with the scheme open to all businesses in communities along the Bittern Line.

Community rail partnerships and groups also encourage sustainable economic development by nurturing social enterprises and community businesses. For example, Rail 74 Community Rail Partnership works with social enterprises and ethical businesses on artwork projects and pop-ups at stations, supporting local economies as well as helping to alleviate poverty and social deprivation. Some projects have developed to a degree that they have stimulated the wider economy, such as in Millom in Cumbria, where the station has been transformed and has now become a central focus of the town. Here, the station now houses a museum, a ticket office – run as a social enterprise, with profits reinvested towards the upkeep of the site – the 'Rail Room' educational heritage centre, and a café and bar, making it a tourist destination in its own right and a catalyst to the economic regeneration of the area, which previously faced post-industrial decline.

When stations are transformed into multi-purpose hubs, there is often potential for part of the site to be converted for use by a local business or enterprise. Community rail often plays a key role in this, assisting with or producing business cases for improvements at stations, and reaching out to communities to seek tenants for previously disused station spaces. Recent projects include the renovation of the old station house at Stow Station on the Borders Railway, which is being transformed into a community space featuring a cycle hub, bar, and kitchen, and a major scheme at Hednesford Station, in which an old rail carriage is being restored as a café and community hub.

Promoting sustainable tourism by rail:

Community rail encourages people to travel by train to access different parts of Britain, with a particular and growing focus, in many areas, on leisure and tourism travel. Rail tourism aligns with sustainable development principles as it allows people to travel without adding to traffic and pollution, offers a sociable, inclusive, and enjoyable travel experience, and provides opportunities for supporting tourist attractions and local businesses to boost economies. Given the widespread acknowledgment that transport emissions must be cut to help tackle the climate emergency, rail-based tourism has the potential to emerge as a sustainable alternative to car and air-based tourism, as it provides a significantly greener option for the medium-length distances associated with domestic tourism, 80% less emissions than car use, and 84% for domestic flights.[41]

Community Rail Network is encouraging community rail partnerships and groups to seize the opportunities linked to the increased domestic tourism market by identifying their local tourism offer and working with partners to promote it to leisure visitors. The local knowledge held within community rail, and its local links, gives partnerships and groups an advantage in building positivity and interest in their line and attracting visitors.

This focus on rail tourism is only set to increase as Britain recovers from the pandemic, with local economies seeking to not only bounce back but 'build back greener'. Recent research of the 'value of rail'[42] by Rail Delivery Group found that train travel would be vital in Summer 2021 to help local businesses hit hardest by COVID-19. The report estimated that leisure passengers travelling by train for days out pre-pandemic spent a total of £46bn per year on activities such as shopping, eating out, and overnight stays, boosting local economies. The study found that four in ten people spent half or more of their spending with small or independent businesses, the lifeblood of local, sustainable economies.

To help to encourage a return to rail, and greater numbers of leisure travellers, many community rail partnerships and groups have engaged with Community Rail Network's 'Days Out by Rail' campaign. This project urged visitors to discover Britain's community railway lines and stations by providing inspiring ideas through themed itineraries, promoted via our tourism website, Scenic Rail Britain. We encouraged community rail partnerships and groups to use the campaign as a springboard for their own tourism promotions and to work with their partners locally to develop a full tourism offer.

This collaborative approach has previously been seen in projects where multiple community rail partnerships have worked together to have a bigger impact on boosting rail-based tourism. Examples include 'Room with a View', in which community rail partnerships across East Anglia worked together and with Greater Anglia to produce promotional videos highlighting days out on the region's branch lines, and 'Wales on Rails', which will see all community rail partnerships in Wales join forces with partners including the country's heritage railways to promote tourism using public transport. Such examples complement efforts from the wider rail industry to attract leisure travellers back to rail, including 'Life is Back on Track', the sector's biggest national marketing campaign in a generation.

Conclusions and recommendations:

As the community rail movement expands and works with an ever-growing range of partners, community rail partnerships and groups, and their railways and stations, remain deep rooted in the communities they serve. This makes them ideally placed to support the sustainable economic, social, and environmental development of those areas.

As this report identifies, the principles of community rail align with those of sustainable development, with its three key strands complemented by the four pillars of the **Community Rail Development Strategy**. [43]

Sustainable development relies heavily on community-level activity, community engagement, and change being enacted in places. It is about thinking about the long-term, how to adapt, how to innovate, how to think ahead. It is about supporting social inclusion, promoting health and wellbeing, giving communities a voice, protecting and enhancing the environment, improving biodiversity, and working in partnership to boost local economies. All of this is fundamental to community rail.

Essentially, community rail, working in partnership with the rail industry, is sustainable development in action at a grassroots level.

In the **Williams-Shapps Plan for Rail**,[44] the government states that it wants railways to become more inclusive, accessible, sustainable, and responsive to local needs and opportunities. The plan also wants the principles of social value to be embedded across the rail network. This report outlines the numerous ways that community rail provides an ideal vehicle for this, and how this marries up with global concepts of sustainable development.

As the examples we have highlighted show, community rail is already playing a key role in all aspects of sustainable development, but there is scope to do more. Community rail partnerships and groups are increasingly framing projects with sustainability in mind and starting to learn from projects identifying best

practice across the network. But there are undoubtedly still many more new, innovative ways that communities can be supported to develop, and different directions for sustainability projects to go in. Community Rail Network is committed to supporting its members is seeking out these directions and embedding the principles of sustainable development across the movement.

We hope the recommendations below are useful for increasing impact in relation to sustainable development, for those within community rail, and the rail industry and wider transport sector.

For community rail:

- Consider the three main areas of sustainable development (economic, social, environmental) in all projects, and how can they make a positive contribution to each;

- Engage with communities so they are meaningfully involved in projects from the outset and can help to define and develop sustainability from a local perspective. Empowering people in this way can create a sense of ownership around local initiatives and solutions;

- Shout about your efforts and share inspiring examples. Use your communications to show what you're achieving (or aiming to achieve) and what the benefits are to communities and their sustainability;

- Don't be afraid to try something new. Sustainable development can mean innovation and different ways of thinking and working with the future in mind, and it can be supported by new partnerships or relationships. Be bold in your ideas;

- Identify and collaborate widely with partners to derive the maximum benefits. Sustainable development is multi-faceted, and there will be many organisations and groups in your local area who you'll be able to join forces with to increase your impact. Work together, and share your resources, experience, and expertise.

For the rail industry and wider transport sector:

- Highlight the links between sustainable development, rail and community rail, and support community rail partnerships and groups to pursue projects with this in mind, helping them to make the links with policy agendas such as COVID-19 recovery, transport decarbonisation and rail transformation, and supporting wider promotion of these initiatives;

- Ensure that community rail partnerships and groups are included as meaningful partners in the design and implementation of rail development and sustainability-related projects, with their contributions respected and valued, and a wider understanding of community rail promoted across your business and contractors;

- Work with community rail to reach out wider into communities, engaging local partners, marginalised groups, and those not using rail now (but who might in the future). Ensure mechanisms are in place for listening and responding to communities, and treat communities as partners in taking projects forward;

- Use rail as a catalyst to spark regeneration and sustainable development post COVID-19. Develop communications and initiatives to promote the sustainability benefits of rail, e.g. in tackling the climate emergency, as well as social and economic benefits. Work with community rail to relate this to local aspirations and identities and to help promote the 'love of the local', showing the railway's important place within the local area;

- Take the pledge outlined in RDG's **Sustainable Stations Guide**[45] to make stations across the network more sustainable, and work with community rail partners to identify and support improvements.

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About Community Rail Network:

Community Rail Network is dedicated to supporting community-based groups and partnerships that connect their community with their railway and deliver social benefit. Members can access operational support, training and development, written resources, networking opportunities, and advice on good practice within all aspects of community rail.

For further information, visit **communityrail.org.uk**.

About Rail Delivery Group:

The Rail Delivery Group (RDG) brings together the companies that run Britain's railway into a single team with one goal - to deliver a better railway for you and your community. RDG continues to work with Community Rail Network to further the case for community rail activity and support for it, as well as improving train operators' knowledge of how the community role can help them and the communities they serve through practical examples.

For information, see **raildeliverygroup.com**.

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