



Community rail: a guide to tackling anti-social behaviour



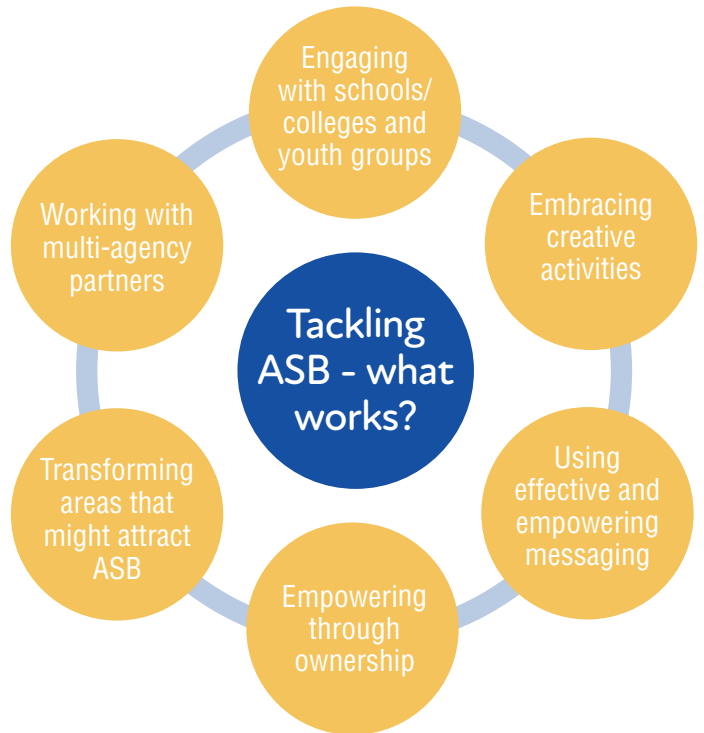
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Community rail partnerships and station groups play a vital role in bringing people together and creating pride in local railways and stations. Many stations have been transformed into welcoming, pleasant and attractive places, and thriving and celebratory gateways and hubs, pivotal to the communities they serve.

Despite these efforts, some stations, and other areas of the railway estate, suffer from instances of anti-social behaviour, vandalism to property and trespass. This guidance considers approaches that community rail partnerships and groups have taken to mitigate these problems, and the principles underpinning successful projects in this area, with a particular focus on working with young people.

What has worked in community rail?



Pic – Kent CRP

Engaging with schools/colleges and youth groups

Where community rail projects have been established to deter anti-social behaviour, such as low-level vandalism at stations, it has often been based on positive engagement with young people.

Numerous community rail partnerships and groups have sought to engage with schools and youth groups near the stations in question to work directly with young people, teaching staff and youth leaders, to create a sense of pride and respect for stations and the railway, and the surrounding area.

By giving young people some direct responsibility for something tangible at the station, e.g. an art display, partnerships and groups have successfully created a bond between the two, with young people showing greater levels of care related to the feature they are involved with, alongside the wider station environment.



Encouraging station adoption: One approach that has worked well is for community rail partnerships and groups to support schools, colleges and youth groups to become official adopters of local stations, facilitating collaborative working and mutual benefits. Schools and colleges link station-based projects to a variety of subjects and curriculum areas, and activities give young people the chance to put skills they have learnt in the classroom into practice while also having a positive, tangible impact on the communities they live in. In turn, the stations become more appealing, welcoming environments for all.

CASE STUDY: Maryport Planters

Following repeated damage to planters and shelters, **Community Rail Cumbria, Northern, and station adoption group The Maryporters** worked with staff and apprentices at Gen2, a local City and Guilds training organisation, to design and produce a bespoke train planter for Maryport Station.

All parties wanted to create a planter robust enough to withstand vandalism while also being something that the local community could be proud of. The project was inspired by a train built by Tony Messenger, a trainer at Gen2 who had sadly passed away. A group of welding and fabrication apprentices were set a challenge to create the new planter as part of their course work, giving them the opportunity to take the lead from the initial ideas stage to final delivery.

The Maryporters also engaged with teachers and pupils from the town's Netherall Secondary School, who subsequently assisted with gardening activity at the station, including finishing up the new planter. The link with the school has seen a newfound respect for the station and surrounding area, and since the installation of the planter there have been no further incidents of anti-social behaviour, with the school keen to become part of the station adoption group.



Embracing creative activities

Research shows that arts and culture can be used to engage and connect with young people of all backgrounds, including those at risk of disaffection from education or dealing with social and personal issues.¹ Community rail partnerships and groups have recognised that creative and visual projects are an effective way of enabling young people to express their views about emotive issues, and to build a sense of connection with local places, which many feel disconnected or excluded from.

Stations can be ideal, public-facing settings for creative projects and displays, and many across the network, while still performing their traditional function, have also become art galleries, studios, exhibitions, museums and performance venues. Projects of this nature can help to reduce anti-social behaviour by engaging people, including young people and others who might feel marginalised, using approaches and language they can relate to. As well as empowering and benefitting those directly involved, the work can also resonate with peer groups and local residents, generating a sense that the station should be respected and valued by all.

1. Tawell A, Thompson I, Daniels H, Elliott V, and Dingwall N with Rubtsova O and Munk K. Being Other: The Effectiveness of Arts Based Approaches in Engaging with Disaffected Young People. University of Oxford, Department of Education, 2016.

Promoting freedom of expression:

Community rail partnerships and groups have had success by engaging young people in ways that draw on and develop their creative ideas and interests, rather than making assumptions or imposing plans on them. They have encouraged expressive and innovative ideas that young people, for example, can confidently showcase to their peers, e.g. graffiti art or music, or practical construction or engineering displays that showcase the skills of those involved.

CASE STUDY: Conwy Station graffiti artwork

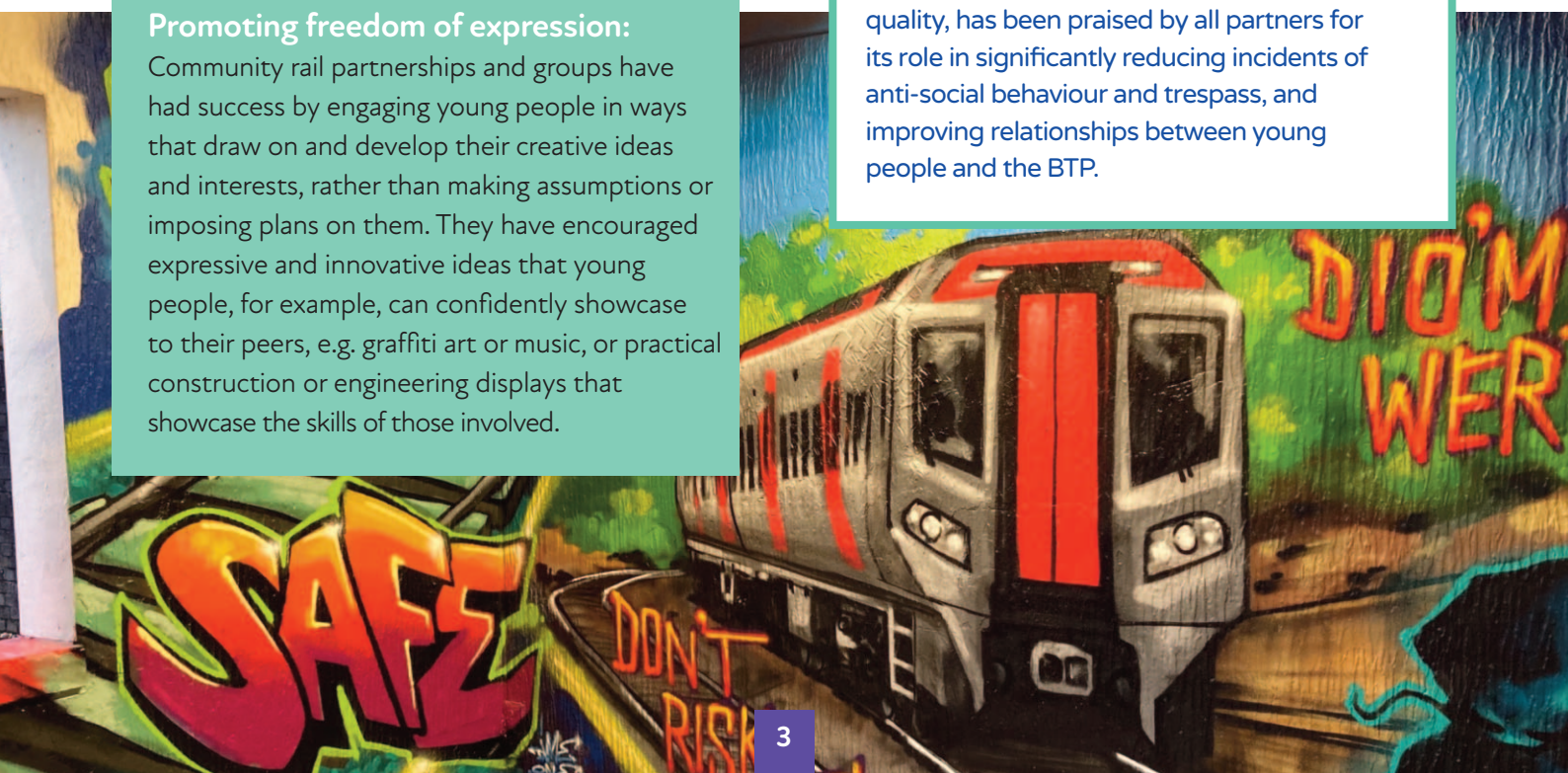
Students from Ysgol Aberconwy worked with a local artist to transform the shelter at Conwy Station into a piece of visual art, highlighting a very important rail safety message.

The project, delivered by the **Conwy Valley and North West Wales Community Rail Partnership** in partnership with Transport for Wales (TfW) and British Transport Police (BTP), was designed to try to reduce trespass and anti-social behaviour, following the success of art-based projects at other stations with young people of a similar age.

The partnership worked with BTP and local police officers to explain the project and discuss the dangers of trespassing on the railway to students, engaging them in a way and context they understood, and encouraging them to think of creative solutions to the problem.

After being shown how to create graffiti style lettering and designs by Andy Birch, of local organisation Dime One North Wales Graffiti Art Murals, the students then worked together to create a design for a large-scale mural before spray painting it themselves.

The mural now takes pride of place at the station, and alongside its impressive visual quality, has been praised by all partners for its role in significantly reducing incidents of anti-social behaviour and trespass, and improving relationships between young people and the BTP.



Using effective and empowering messaging

The consequences and risks associated with anti-social behaviour on the railway and at stations are significant, and delivering strong and effective messaging around the criminal and safety implications of such activity is important.

However, there is research to suggest that overtly aggressive messaging based around fear, delivered in formal situations and settings, may not be the best solution to the problem, and may even provoke further resistance and backlash.² Community rail is well-positioned to take a more interactive, engaging approach, given its place within local communities, combining vital educational messages with interactive discussion and more informal and enjoyable activities.

Research shows that it is vital to empower and encourage young people to develop solutions and strategies that work for them, promoting their agency and self-efficacy.³ Community rail activities can enable young people to voice their concerns, views, and experiences, and formulate ideas and potential solutions for reducing anti-social behaviour and increasing greater ownership and responsibility towards the railway.

CASE STUDY: Community Rail Education Network – Backtrack

The Community Rail Education Network

were initially approached by Network Rail to create a competition to address the 25% increase in trespassing that occurred during the COVID-19 lockdown.

Although a poster competition was initially suggested, the group, which features many community rail partnerships from the Northern network, felt that creating films and songs, alongside scripts, storyboards, and social media graphics, would be more appealing to young people, given the increased interest in homemade videos on apps such as TikTok.

The Network invited 11–18-year-olds to create content to warn their peers not to trespass on the railway, giving them the opportunity to improve and showcase their digital skills, while delivering crucial messages to promote safety and discourage anti-social behaviour.

In the competition's first year in 2020, posts received over 30,000 views on social media and the winning videos and songs were played to more than 1,500 young people during youth engagement sessions led by education network members.

The campaign returned for its fifth year in September 2024, engaging young people in ever more creative ways to respect the railway and act responsibly to enjoy the opportunities it offers.

Facilitating positive discussion:

Consider how you might incorporate warnings around the consequences of anti-social behaviour into more positive messaging around the railway. As well as vital safety messages, think about how you could also include information around the benefits of using the railway, such as to access opportunities and travel more sustainably. Instead of a formal talk or presentation, consider a facilitated discussion, or creative and/or practical activities that might engage people more effectively and encourage them to openly express their views and ideas.



2. Ruiter RA, Kessels LT, Peters GJ, Kok G. Sixty years of fear appeal research: current state of the evidence. *Int J Psychol*. 2014 Apr;49(2):63-70. doi: 10.1002/ijop.12042. Epub 2014 Feb 24. PMID: 24811876.

3. Guest Editorial: Empowering Young People. Anne Greig, Charmian Hobbs & Sue Roffey. *Educational & Child Psychology Vol. 31 No. 1* © The British Psychological Society, 2014

Empowering through ownership

Many young people and marginalised groups face barriers using the railway and feel excluded from it. This sense of exclusion and lack of ownership can potentially lead to anti-social behaviour, with people more inclined to deface and damage things and places they don't benefit from or feel connected to.

Our experience suggests young people getting involved in community rail and other community initiatives are determined to challenge views of young people as troublemakers and show the positive contributions they can make. This fits with research suggesting that young people can counteract negative stereotypes of youth when they are successfully engaged in leadership and social action.⁴

To maximise the benefits of community rail projects, and help minimise the likelihood of anti-social behaviour, e.g. in station environments, it is important that community rail partnerships and groups work to deliver initiatives that are genuinely youth-led, empowering young people through ownership. They should be shaped by their ideas and interests, allowing their skills and creativity to come to the fore, and be showcased to the wider community.

4. Fiscus, L. (2003). Youth as equal partners in decision making. *The Education Digest*, 68(7), 58-62.

Ensuring genuine engagement and

co-production: To promote engagement, community rail partnerships and groups need to reach out to young people on their terms, offering opportunities that are flexible, appealing and fun, in a welcoming environment where their contributions are recognised. By valuing young people, they can empower them to enthuse their peers by sharing their experiences, creating a sense of positivity around railways and stations, and helping to negate associations between the railways and anti-social behaviour.



CASE STUDY: Endeavour, station adopters at Darnall

Northern worked with **Endeavour**, a charity that supports vulnerable and marginalised young people, including those missing from education, to adopt Darnall Station, a neglected station on the outskirts of Sheffield.

The charity used the station to provide a base for social action activity for its members, which include refugees, asylum seekers, and travellers, alongside local youngsters.

The youth-led station adoption group has been supported to devise and deliver activities to improve the station and surrounding area, aiming to reduce anti-social behaviour, raise the profile of the station locally, and encourage young people and their families to increase their rail use.

As well as improving the physical station environment, such as by removing a lorry-load quantity of litter, the group has vastly enhanced the image of young people in the surrounding area via their demonstrably positive activity.

The group subsequently made a film for Northern and the South Yorkshire Passenger Transport Executive about the benefits of station adoption, which was used as an example of best practice at Northern's Community Rail Conference.

Transforming areas that might attract anti-social behaviour

Experience suggests that stations and land left neglected to become derelict can attract anti-social behaviour given their unsightly appearance and perceived lack of care.

Community rail partnerships and groups can work with rail industry partners to identify such areas, and are ideally placed to engage with communities, including young people and those marginalised from rail, to explore ideas to bring them back to life.

Working to transform such areas and find new uses that deliver community benefits and social value can lead to a newfound respect for the rail estate and a reduction in incidents such as vandalism, fly-tipping and graffiti.

This also improves perceptions of safety and security, which can help in improving the experience of rail users and gaining support and funding for future developments.



Thinking creatively: If the aim of a project is to transform station buildings/land to deter youth-related anti-social behaviour, think creatively as to how such areas could be put to new use. Popular projects within community rail include large-scale artwork or the development of new green spaces, but whatever the focus, a key factor in achieving sustained involvement and commitment is giving participants the freedom to plan and deliver projects in their own way within an inclusive, non-pressurised environment.

CASE STUDY: North Staffs CRP – Alsager Station Adopt-A-Shelter

Action was needed to combat a long-standing problem with anti-social behaviour at Alsager Station, particularly in and around the Platform 2 waiting shelter, which was regularly plagued by litter, broken windows and seats, and missing plants. **North Staffs Community Rail Partnership**, East Midlands Railway, and the **Friends of Alsager Station** sought to address the problem by arranging for a local primary school, Excalibur, to ‘adopt’ the shelter.

The community rail partnership and station group worked with the school to tend to the shelter and use it as a site to showcase bright and vibrant artwork. Pupils also planted up new trough planters and filled two recycled poster cases with their creative work on local history and the environment.

As the project has progressed, the amount of litter left in the shelter has reduced significantly, there have been no reports of damage, and passengers have made positive comments about the improved station environment. The school has developed a newfound connection with its local station, and the relationship with the community rail partnership continues, including the delivery of rail safety sessions to pupils at the school.



Working with multi-agency partners

One of the biggest barriers cited by those working in community rail who want to work collaboratively with young people is making links with schools, colleges and youth groups, where there is no pre-existing relationship.

We have already touched upon the importance of engaging with schools and colleges, and using an approach that links projects to different curriculum areas or vocational programmes of learning, or important issues such as social responsibility and rail safety. However, projects designed to deter anti-social behaviour can also be effective through engaging with young people outside of an educational setting, and working with young people not in education, training or employment can offer enrichment and access to a wide range of new opportunities.

In these scenarios, community rail partnerships and groups have seen the benefits of working with a range of multi-agency partners to bring in their expertise and maximise engagement opportunities by linking rail-related messaging with other community-led projects and training. Partners have included local authority youth services, community outreach programmes, sports clubs and uniformed groups (see Community Rail Network's collaboration with the Scouts on '[Platforms for Change](#)' as a recent example), alongside organisations such as Network Rail and the British Transport Police.

Maximising engagement opportunities:

Embrace joint working with a wide range of partners to take advantage of their knowledge and resources, and opportunities to engage young people in a social or recreational setting they have chosen to participate in. By using the positive relationships young people have with these partners, you can engage them on 'their own turf' and may be able to weave your own projects and messaging into existing schemes, building positivity, ownership and confidence towards rail and enthusiasm for future activities.



CASE STUDY: Robin Hood Line CRP – 'Distraction' sports/rail safety project

In a bid to tackle anti-social behaviour at various stations within the Bolsover District, the **Robin Hood Line CRP** created a 'distraction' project to engage young people in the affected areas.

Via their 'You vs Train' initiative, they delivered multi-sports activities incorporating key rail safety messages such as the dangers of trespass, breaking down barriers to reach young people in a recreational setting.

Following a successful pilot, the project has secured ongoing funding from East Midlands Railway, various local councils, the Community Safety Partnership, and the UK Shared Prosperity Fund to run for 48 weeks of the year until at least 2025, and has expanded to include skills and employment elements.

Since delivery began in 2021, there has been a noticeable downturn in anti-social behaviour, and residents have reported increased feelings of safety.

As of 2024, the project had engaged nearly **250 young people, with a total social value estimated at just under £115,000.**

Further information:

You can find more information and examples of successful youth engagement in our report, '[Looking to the future: an exploration of youth engagement in rail.](#)'

For specific support and advice on tackling anti-social behaviour in your area, members can speak to their usual contact in our Support and Development **team**.

For non-members, you can find out more about joining Community Rail Network [here](#).



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