



IMPACT REPORT 2023-24



Community Rail Network in brief

What we do

We empower, support and champion the community rail movement.

What we stand for

A flourishing community rail movement connecting people and their railways, contributing to inclusive, empowered, sustainable and healthy communities.

Who we are

As the national membership body for the community rail movement, we advocate for community rail, share its insights, and support our members through membership services and events.

Where we do it

We work to champion the community rail movement across Britain. The 75 community rail partnerships and nearly 1,300 station groups we represent now cover more than a third of Britain's rail network and half of its stations.

Why we do it

Community rail brings profound benefits to our communities and people's lives. For every £1 spent, community rail creates a social return of £17.89 – helping to promote social inclusion, improve access to opportunity and shape a greener, more equitable transport future.



Community Rail Lancashire.

Community rail's role

- Enhancing the railways' contribution to social inclusion, sustainable development and health and wellbeing, including by maximising access to and use of the railways.
- Ensuring communities have a voice and play a part in the development and improvement of our railways, so this meets community needs and delivers maximum social, environmental and economic value.
- Communicating the development and importance of railways to local communities, enhancing understanding and pride, and promoting rail as a key part of sustainable, healthy travel.



A note from the chief executive,
Jools Townsend

We started 2023-24 facing major challenges, yet ended it feeling hopeful for the transformation and renewal ahead of us. This mounting wave of optimism, and the strong position we are now in, is credit to our burgeoning array of strong relationships, blossoming respect and recognition for community rail, and of course the brilliant people that make up our organisation and our movement.

Rewinding back to the start of 2023-24, with the railway's finances still much constrained following the pandemic, we found ourselves dealing with the threat of major cuts to community rail funding. Only through our steadfast relationships with train operators and government, and our deep knowledge of and belief in community rail, were we able to find a way through, avoiding significant reductions in core funding, so community rail could weather the storm, without job losses.

A major crisis was averted, but we learnt from this difficult period, and doubled down with our efforts to increase resilience in community rail, diversify funding, and build our evidence base on the value community rail creates.

Emerging from the end of 2023-24, we found ourselves looking ahead to a very different political landscape and operating environment, with a general election called for July, and all parties committed to rail reform.

Back to the present, with the new government now in place, we are warmly welcoming the pace of change, towards a railway that delivers maximum benefit for all our communities, and a greener, more integrated transport system. With robust evidence now in place (dotted through this report) around the incredible benefits we all know community rail delivers, we have a powerful case to make, and role to play, moving forward.



A note from the chair,
Jeremy Whitaker

The last year has been one of unprecedented challenge and uncertainty, globally, economically, and for the railway. Forthcoming changes to the industry are to be welcomed as a huge opportunity, but at the same time change creates risk and uncertainty for organisations and individuals and we must prepare for this.

The community rail movement has shown itself once again to be resourceful and resilient over the last year; the very values and approach which lie at the heart of what it is as a movement, and which has sustained it since its very inception. These values and our strong relationships with government, at all levels, and individual train operators, has enabled us to overcome the challenges we have faced. We are also extremely fortunate to have a growing number of strong and increasingly diverse corporate partners. I remain confident that we will rise to meet and overcome future challenges given the strength of the movement.

Against the background of these challenges, we have performed well and emerged stronger and more resilient. It has also taught us that often the most significant challenges come from quite close to home. We have moved quickly and already identified the need to diversify our income base and improve our resilience and this work is underway, but it is something which we must all own.

During the year we set in motion the work to quantify our value in more depth and with greater rigour than ever before. As we now know, the results of that work have provided evidence of our outstanding contribution to the industry and the communities we serve.

Our achievements over the last year are down to our members, supporters, and funders and I would like to thank all of you on behalf of the Board for your continued support. I would also like to thank Jools and the team for their dedication and professionalism over the last year. Finally, I would like to thank my fellow Board members for their continued support.

How do we support and empower our members?

We support our members – community rail partnerships (CRPs), station friends/adoption groups, community-led station projects, and other community groups engaging with rail – to develop their impact locally, while championing community rail regionally and nationally.

Our team provides expertise, encouragement, structure and leadership, building members' capacity and confidence to deliver positive outcomes, in line with our mission and the Department for Transport's [Community Rail Development Strategy](#).

- We advise on community rail planning and projects to maximise the social, environmental and economic value the movement delivers.
- We administer grant schemes, as well as signposting and advising on wider funding opportunities, to ensure community rail receives the vital support it needs.
- Our events, webinars and training bring key topics to life, enabling exchange and networking between other members and partners.
- We offer practical guidance booklets, tools and in-depth reports designed to help those working and volunteering in community rail expand their knowledge and confidence.
- We support our members to track and record their activities to assess their outcomes and impact, improving understanding and assessment of how social value is delivered and developed in community rail.
- We continue to develop our membership offer, ensuring this remains constructive and aligned with our members' needs and priorities, while aiding the ongoing growth and development of the movement.

In 2023-24, we provided over 950 instances of support to members, online and in-person, on wide-ranging topics, including:



Community engagement, volunteering and social inclusion

We supported Gloucestershire CRP with the planning and funding of their initiative to develop a map and exhibition highlighting how the railway can be used to explore Black art, cultures and history across the county.



Education and youth engagement

We provided one-to-one support and mentoring for officers from Platform Rail, Heart of England CRP and Bishop Line CRP on how they can expand their education and youth engagement offer within their localities.



Integrated sustainable transport improvements

We supported Kent CRP in developing 'cycle-rail' solutions for station footbridges to encourage wider active travel access to rail.



Rail travel and tourism promotion

We advised Southeast Communities Rail Partnership on using digital travel guides to promote greener leisure journeys on their lines, including promoting their Treasure Hunt app to new audiences not using the railway already.



Station buildings development

We worked closely with Hampshire CRP on the development of a project to deliver a full refurbishment of Woolston Signal Box, obtaining match funding from across the rail industry.

We run the Department for Transport and Welsh Government’s accreditation scheme, guiding CRPs through the process. The scheme recognises high standards of governance, financial propriety, planning, engagement and offering a representative community voice.

Out of the 57 CRPs currently accredited, 4 achieved accreditation for the first time in 2023-24.



In our 2023 members’ survey:



91% said they got value for money from their membership



74% had received direct support from us in the past year



82% had attended at least one event/training course/webinar



86% said we communicate well with members

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“We’re very happy with the support we receive. Sometimes it’s just a matter of gaining clarity, and the advice and feedback is always constructive.”

“We have always, in our 30 years of station custodianship, received excellent assistance and information from Community Rail Network. Receiving grants and enthusiastic promotion has ensured we have been recognised nationwide and had local recognition of our efforts.”

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Community Rail Awards 2024.



Our 19th Community Rail Awards returned bigger and better than ever in Swansea in March 2024. The celebratory evening, sponsored by Transport for Wales and Great Western Railway, saw our members recognised for their positive contributions, enriching lives, enhancing local places, and promoting sustainable and inclusive travel and mobility.



Our comprehensive programme of training and events gave our members the opportunity to connect, collaborate, learn and share over a wide range of topics, including:

- Crowdfunding for community rail partnerships
- Community engagement
- Project management and delivering outcomes
- Recruiting volunteers
- Sustainable and wildlife-friendly gardening
- Developing trails and walking routes
- Submitting a strong awards entry



**3
webinars**



**6
workshops**



**6
bespoke
training
sessions**



**4
networking
sessions**



Training and networking for new community rail officers, January 2024.

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“The training support has been outstanding, and this is key to officer development, gaining knowledge and confidence. The networking benefits are valued and appreciated. Just keep doing what you are already doing.”

.....

“Our previous chair told me that if there was one meeting I should make every effort to attend, it was Community Rail Network’s chairs network. After my first meeting, I can see what he meant. Very useful.”

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The Community Rail Conference, which we run jointly with the Department for Transport for CRPs, was held in Nottingham in November 2023. We trialled our first ‘open platform’ format, where over 140 delegates were empowered to shape the agenda, putting forward and delivering 18 half-hour sessions on topics they considered important for deeper discussion.



Said the opportunity to share ideas and hear from others was good or very good.



Said that they heard ideas/perspectives to help them develop activities or projects.

Community Rail Education Network

An estimated **65,000 children and young people** are engaged annually with community rail, via partnership working with **2,000 schools, colleges and youth groups**. This crucial work connects and empowers younger generations, helping them to feel confident using rail to access the opportunities they want, and developing sustainable travel habits.

The Community Rail Education Network is an expert forum we run, to share ideas and advance projects engaging children and young people.

It has grown from 56 members in December 2022 to 120 in August 2024. 12 meetings took place in 2023-24, sharing good practice among our members and bringing in expert speakers.

120
MEMBERS



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“I find the way the sessions are run extremely beneficial; they always have a solid, relevant focus and opportunities for networking and sharing. I feel like we have built excellent relationships from the meetings, which have allowed us to shadow, learn and enquire further.”

”



Friends of Hindley Station.

Platforms for Change

In 2023-24, we collaborated with the Scouts Association to set up Platforms for Change, a programme to involve Scout groups across Britain in community rail activity, including station gardening and rail confidence trips.

By August 2024, 165 Scout groups had been matched with stations.

165
SCOUT GROUPS



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“Platforms for Change gives communities the opportunity to reach out and involve its youngest members. Having structure and support from Community Rail Network and the Scouts to deliver the programme gives station friends groups such as ours the chance to share their diverse skills. There really is nothing like seeing the wonder in a child’s eyes as they learn something new.”

Sheila Davidson, Friends of Hindley Station

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“The Leeds Station visit [hosted by Community Rail Lancashire] was an absolute highlight for all involved. We felt like VIPs and loved sitting in the driver’s seat! Finding out about different rail careers and having the chance to meet staff and ask questions was invaluable.”

Cubs Group Leader

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CASE STUDY

Supporting new CRPs to flourish and providing a voice for communities

Oxfordshire CRP became a Community Rail Network member in December 2023, following work by our team and local partners to ensure the CRP is well-rooted in the communities it serves.

This included providing guidance for every aspect of establishing a new CRP, from feasibility reports to stakeholder engagement, to activity planning and fundraising. We also ran a bespoke session on how to establish and effectively communicate the distinct identity of Oxfordshire CRP at a local, regional and national level.

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“We are grateful for the support received from Community Rail Network throughout the research, development and business planning for Oxfordshire Community Rail Partnership. The Community Rail Network team supported us to map our strategic direction and nurture crucial stakeholder relationships that have supported an impactful and meaningful first year of project delivery.”

Alayne McDonald, Oxfordshire CRP

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How do we ensure community rail insights inform policy and decision-making?

As the umbrella body for the community rail movement, we strive to keep community rail on the agenda, raising its profile and showing how its experiences can inform policy and ‘decision making’.

We engage with policy and decision-makers at national, devolved and regional levels, using community rail’s unique insights to support strategies, develop thinking, and influence the debate towards inclusive, sustainable transport and flourishing communities, with rail playing a maximum role.

Camberwell Society at Denmark Hill Station.



In 2023-24, our chief executive and senior leadership team shared community rail’s insights and experiences on a range of transport policy themes, including by:

- Meeting with (then) Rail Minister Huw Merriman MP, Shadow Rail Ministers Tan Dhesi MP and Stephen Morgan MP, and Lee Waters, Welsh Government Deputy Minister for Climate Change
- Sitting on the Department for Transport’s Net Zero Transport Board
- Continuing to feed into rail reform and transformation, including engaging the Great British Railways Transition Team on how community rail’s role in accessibility and inclusion can be fully developed
- Responding to Labour’s Plan for Rail
- Speaking at industry events such as the Great Transport Debate, Rail Partners’ event at the Liberal Democrats Conference, and a consortium in Utrecht about the development of a community rail umbrella organisation in the Netherlands
- Giving evidence to the Climate Change, Environment and Infrastructure Committee at the Welsh Parliament
- Meeting regional mayors and transport officials including Tracey Brabin, Mayor of West Yorkshire

Our chief executive continued to chair the Sustainable Transport Alliance, a partnership of eight leading organisations advising policy makers to champion and advance sustainable, inclusive transport.

In early 2024, they together met with then Shadow Secretaries of State for Transport Louise Haigh MP and Climate Change and Net Zero Ed Milliband MP, to share the Alliance’s combined expertise and demonstrate how public, community, shared and active travel can be prioritised and developed, unlocking huge community benefit.

Sustainable Transport Alliance marks World Car Free Day (22 September 2024) at the Labour Party Conference.



We continually harnessed views and insights from our members to inform our policy work, including responses to government consultations. This included the Draft Rail Reform Bill and the Urban and Rail Transport Review, as well as feeding into Network Rail’s strategic planning process for Control Period 7 and Transport for the North’s Strategic Transport Plan.

Given community rail’s role to provide a voice for communities on local rail services, we encouraged and supported our members to carefully study the proposals to close and reduce the hours of ticket offices across England, considering what this would mean to local communities. We are proud of the way we supported members to respond in a meaningful way, showing how the proposals could undermine efforts to create a more inclusive railway.

“Like many CRPs, our plans for the summer were derailed by the ticket office closure proposals. The Transport Focus session arranged by Community Rail Network was invaluable – we benefitted from the insights given, and our submission was all the stronger for it.”

Railway 200

We ensured community rail had a seat at the table as plans for Railway 200 started taking shape. Throughout 2025, we will be joining our rail industry partners and the nation in celebrating the birth of the modern railway, and the power of community rail in bringing communities together. Our director of communications and policy Sarah Chilton continues to sit on the national steering group, and we took part in a launch event in London in November 2023.

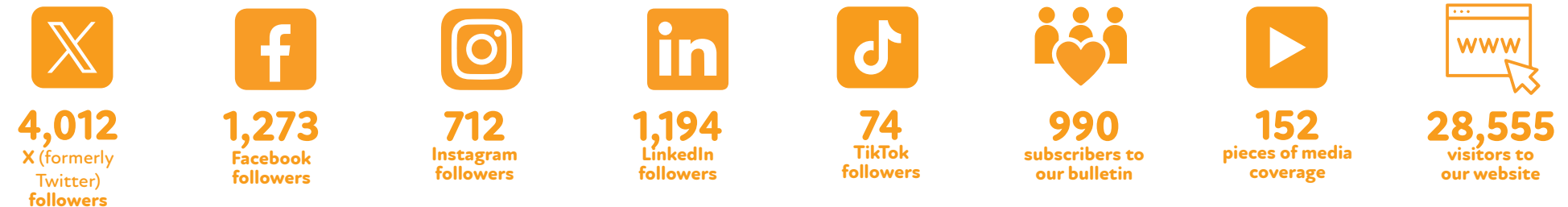


Chief executive Jools Townsend speaking at Railway 200 event, November 2023. Photo credit: Philip Marsh.

We made use of our expanding communications channels to spread opportunities, celebrate stories and share good practice within community rail, as well as conveying community rail’s importance in the wider world.

Through our well-read Community Rail News bulletin, social media platforms and website, we continued to build a positive narrative around community rail’s social, environmental and economic outcomes.

By the end of March 2024, we had:



CASE STUDY

Supporting social and economic development

Derwent Valley CRP encourages people to visit Matlock Bath and the Heights of Abraham hilltop park and estate by rail. The partnership used funding from the tourist attraction and our Integrated Sustainable Travel Fund to create a promotional film, ‘Mrs Brassington’s Big Day Out’.

The Heights of Abraham saw a good return on its investment, with the number of visitors arriving by rail in Summer 2022 – measured via their rail tickets and the use of a specific 25% discount code – doubling compared to Summer 2021.

The promotion also saw passenger numbers at Matlock Bath exceed pre-COVID levels, with an estimated 15-20% of passengers using the station going on to visit the Heights of Abraham.

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“We think this was a very worthwhile project, that has given us a better understanding of the scope and likely return for future rail promotions. We will certainly be increasing our efforts to attract visitors by rail in the future.”

Heights of Abraham

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How do we put community rail at the forefront of a shift to sustainable, inclusive, active travel?

We supported members and worked with partners to help achieve local and national progress on sustainable, inclusive and healthy travel.

We administered 11 grants from the Department for Transport's Integrated Sustainable Transport Fund to help fund community rail initiatives that connect rail with other sustainable modes, including:

- Developing a new map and signage around Accrington Station to improve active travel and car-free journeys
- A feasibility study on connectivity between Brockenhurst Station and Lymington Hospital
- Promoting electric bike hire as an option for sustainable, onward travel from Buxton Station
- Production and marketing of promotional videos showcasing sustainable transport links from stations in Dorchester
- Co-designing an integrated bus and rail travel workshop for young people with additional needs and their carers in Reading



Devon & Cornwall Rail Partnership.



Friends of Buxton Station.

Community Rail Week returned for the third time 22-28 May 2023, sponsored once again by Rail Delivery Group. The theme ‘Connecting Communities by Rail’ provided us with a chance to raise the profile of the work community rail delivers to bring people together, create more inclusive communities and mobility, and deliver socio-economic benefit.

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“I liked the idea of promoting what people are doing anyway, and then expanding on those activities with a simple theme. ‘Connecting Communities by Rail’ was a good one as it’s something we do all the time, but others could think about their own travel options.”

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Community Rail Week 2023 in numbers



70

CRPs and station groups involved



2.3K

unique users visited our website



52

partners and 12 train operating companies supported the campaign on social media



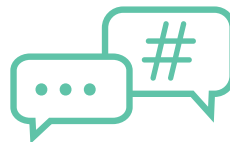
92

member-led events and activities took place



79

pieces of media coverage



2.8K

posts with #CommunityRailWeek or #ConnectingCommunitiesByRail on Twitter

We held our first parliamentary reception at Holyrood in Scotland, where we welcomed members of the Scottish Parliament (including then Transport Minister Kevin Stewart MSP and host Emma Harper MSP) to join representatives from community rail in celebrating the work of the movement across Scotland.

We teamed up with sponsors Rail Delivery Group for their annual World Cup of Stations. Over 100 community-supported railway stations were nominated, recognising the efforts of volunteers across Britain. 48 stations were shortlisted, competing for public votes throughout Community Rail Week. Wemyss Bay Station won the vote, recognising the brilliant work of the Friends of Wemyss Bay, as well as the station itself and its unique architecture, with Denmark Hill and Leamington Spa as runners-up.



Community rail partnerships in the East Midlands Railway region at Nottingham Station, Community Rail Week 2023.



Our tourism and leisure initiative, Scenic Rail Britain, sponsored by Trainline, continued to lead the way promoting green, community-focused tourism by rail. In 2023-24 we achieved:



8.3K
website visitors
per month



3.7K
receive our newsletter
each month



2.6K
followers on
X (formerly Twitter)



9.3K
followers on
Facebook



2.7K
followers on
Instagram



278
followers on
TikTok

Tourism Network trip to Lowestoft, August 2024.



Our Days Out by Rail campaign returned 3-28 July 2023. 25 CRPs and station groups took part, promoting sustainable family days out on lesser-known community rail lines. 18.7k users visited the Scenic Rail Britain website (where it was hosted) during the campaign, resulting in the highest monthly visitors since the site launched in 2017.

As well as these campaigns and promotional initiatives, we continued to run the Community Rail Tourism Network, a supportive space for members to share best practice and learn from others, with a tourism and leisure focus. 38 members now regularly attend, using the forum to bolster their approach to encouraging more people to take the train for greener, healthier journeys. For the first time this year, the Tourism Network featured external speakers, such as Go Jauntly and RailWalks.co.uk.

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“I find this tourism group to be really useful, not just in terms of my work, but also for my mental health. It’s reassuring to know other officers have similar challenges.”

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CASE STUDY

Promoting sustainable, healthy and accessible travel

Southeast Communities Rail Partnership wanted to promote onward sustainable travel for passengers arriving at Seaford Station, encouraging exploration via active travel or public transport. The station had poor signage and wayfinding, with staff often having to provide tourist information and produce hand-drawn maps for people wanting to access the town and surrounding area.

With support from our Integrated Sustainable Travel Fund, the CRP created an integrated travel map signposting places to visit and how to reach them via walking and wheeling, cycling and buses. One of the main journeys promoted via the map, from Seaford Station to Seven Sisters Country Park, saw more than 317,000 passengers using the rail/bus link in the year after the map's launch, with patronage up 9% in August 2024 compared to the same month in 2023.



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“Seaford Station is such a wonderful stepping stone into the National Park and this project has really enhanced the information and resources we’re offering visitors. There are so many opportunities to travel sustainably in the National Park, whether by walking, cycling, taking the bus or train, and we want to spread the word about how accessible this treasured landscape is for everybody.”

Emily Summers-Mileman, South Downs National Park

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How are we developing broader support for community rail and a strong network of reciprocity?

From annual funding of c. £7.2million from government and rail sources, community rail produces a social return on investment of £17.89 per £1 spent, engaging 125,000 people a year in activities that create a multitude of opportunities and benefits for local people, places and economies, and our shared future.

Despite our growing evidence of community rail's value, this year was not without its challenges. Like many parts of the third sector, community rail faced a tightening fiscal envelope as 2022-23 drew to a close. As well as working proactively with the Department for Transport to help manage these challenges and minimise the impact to community rail, we stepped up our support on fundraising to help members develop their approach to demonstrating their impact and diversifying their income sources.

This included training and resources on grants, corporate and community fundraising, plus communications, signposting relevant grants, and direct, tailored advice on key sources. We continued to emphasise the importance of our members evidencing their impact, with our free Impact tool seeing increasing use and relevance for demonstrating social value and supporting the generation of funding from wider sources.

Community Rail Conference, November 2023.



£7.2M
from government
and rail sources



£17.89
return on
investment
per £1 spent



125K
people engaged
in local activities

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“We use Impact to capture the outcomes of some projects and use information directly from Impact to report to funding partners.”

.....

“We have started to use Impact to record activities and see this as a useful tool to keep all the information in one place. We know much work by officers and station adoption groups goes unrecorded and this is a way of demonstrating social value.”

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CASE STUDY

Bringing communities together and supporting diversity and inclusion

Sevenside CRP's Days Out by Train initiative offers bespoke, supported trips for those facing barriers to rail travel. This includes people who are partially sighted or blind, neurodivergent and recently settled communities, refugees, and people living with dementia. The trips focus on increasing confidence in rail travel and promote ongoing independent rail use. Of 58 people who took part in seven trips, 90% said they felt increased confidence to use the trains, 100% said they enjoyed their experience, and 70% said they were very likely to take the same journey again. The project, supported by the Community Rail Development Fund, returned a social value benefit of £255,291.

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“First time using my local station, I don't know many other places except my neighbourhood.

I want to take my son to Severn Beach for the day, it is lovely. We will go on the train.”

Days Out By Train participant

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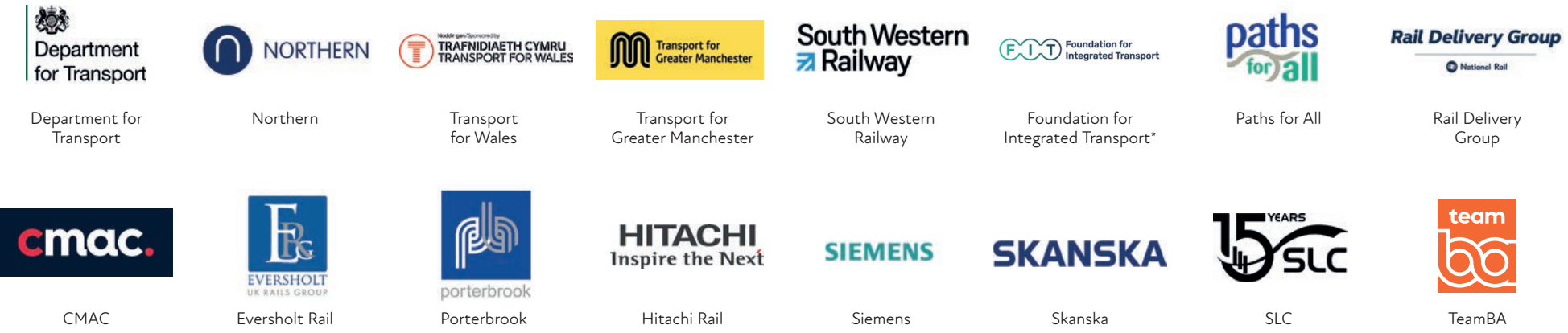
In 2023-24, we continued to manage and promote grant schemes on behalf of government and industry partners:

- Community Rail Development Fund (for accredited CRPs in England and Wales), run on behalf of the Department for Transport and Welsh Government, awarded **£364,911**
- Small Grants Fund for England, run on behalf of the Department for Transport, awarded **£59,185**
- Integrated Sustainable Transport Fund, run on behalf of the Department for Transport, awarded **£56,637**
- South Western Railway Station Adoption Fund, awarded **£12,154**
- Transport for Greater Manchester Small Grants Fund, awarded **£12,838**

In total, £505,725 was awarded via our schemes to community rail projects and developments in 2023-24.



Our core funders and corporate partners:



As a not-for-profit organisation, Community Rail Network is dependent on sponsors and supporters, and we are hugely grateful to our growing list of funders, partners and donors for their support.

As well as providing financial support, many of our partners advise and support our members on specialist topics, team up corporate and community volunteers, and provide a platform to share community rail's news and insights.

In 2023-24 we welcomed new corporate partner TeamBA, who have been proactive in empowering community rail, offering expertise on creative media projects and events.

Find out more about partnership opportunities via our [website](#).

Our corporate donors, project sponsors, and in-kind supporters:



* Joined post-March 2024.

How are we developing as an expert, well-connected, high-performing, dynamic organisation?

We're a passionate and dynamic team, always spurring ourselves to do more and do better. We believe in empowering our people to continually develop their skills, awareness and approach, so everyone is supported to reach their full potential and effectively serve the community rail movement.

We use our regular team meetings, staff review process and engaging planning cycle to support each other and ensure everyone's ideas are heard and experiences drawn on. All staff maintain a personal development plan and are encouraged to undertake ongoing learning. This year, this included learning on collaborative approaches to volunteering and community service, third sector leadership, producing digital content, building solid funder relationships, and a range of rail and sustainable transport conferences.

We continue to use an annual members' survey, plus year-round conversations and events, and the stewardship of our board, to ensure we're member-led and consistently inspired and driven by the ever-evolving experiences of those working and volunteering across the field.

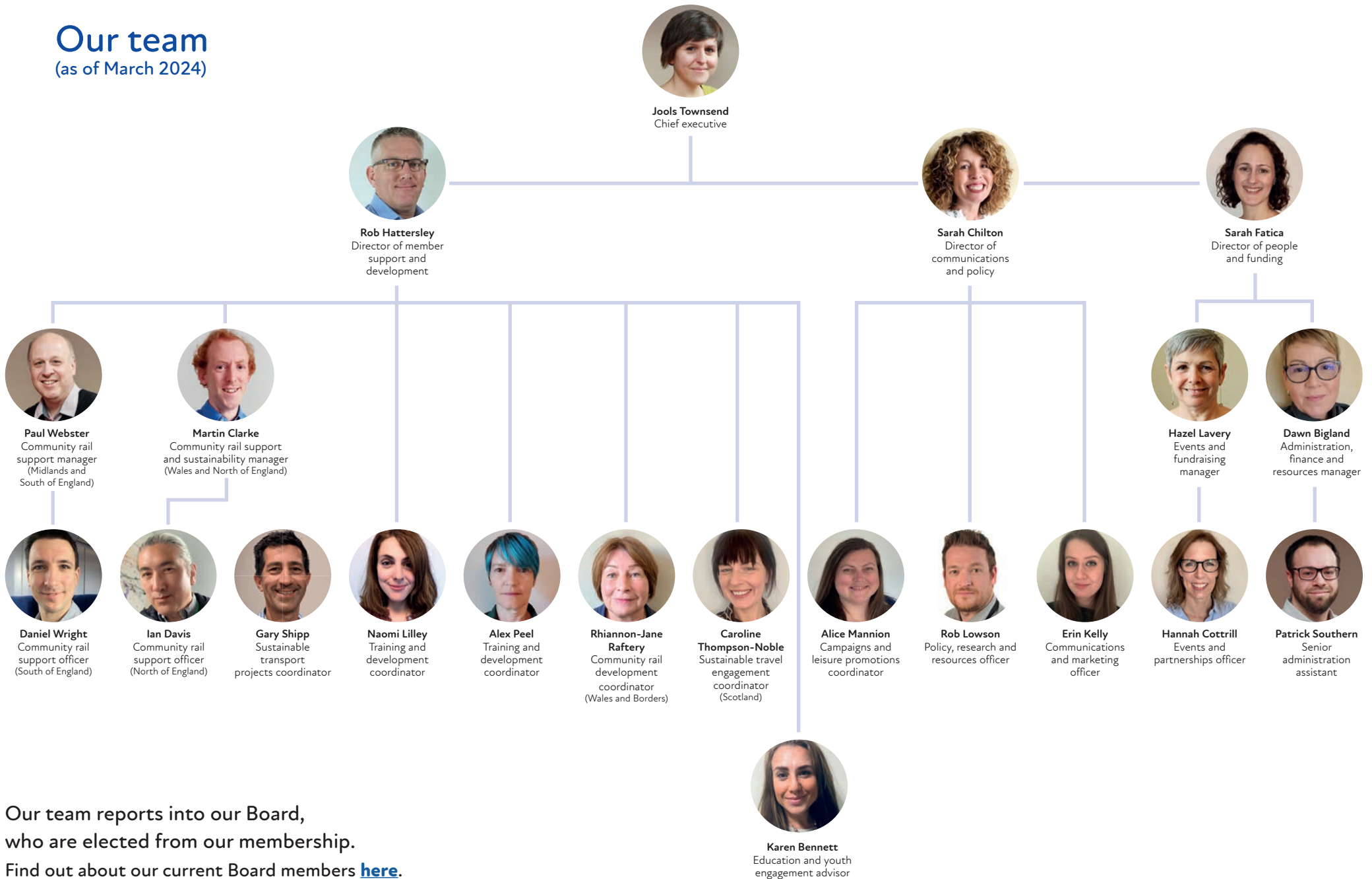
Our reorganised support & development team structure came into effect in March 2024. By differentiating between regions support and programmes development, we hope to improve efficiency and focus within the team, allowing our members to tap into the range of expertise and support on offer.



Community Rail Conference, March 2023.

Our team

(as of March 2024)



Our team reports into our Board,
who are elected from our membership.

Find out about our current Board members [here](#).

This Community Rail Network Impact Report 2023-24 is a draft, subject to agreement by our members at our January 2025 AGM.

Find out more about community rail and our work supporting community rail partnerships and groups at communityrail.org.uk, where you can also meet the team.

Find out more about becoming a member or partner at <https://communityrail.org.uk/join-us/>

Front cover image courtesy of New River Line CRP.



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W: www.communityrail.org.uk