

Written evidence submitted by Community Rail Network (RIP0030)

Community Rail Network is a not-for-profit organisation working across Britain to support, champion and represent community rail: a growing, thriving grassroots movement that works to engage communities with their railways, and ensure local people benefit from railways and stations.

This growing movement now includes 75 community rail partnerships (CRPs), c. 1,300 'station friends' volunteer groups, and other community groups linked to the railways, spread across Britain. These are community-based and community-led groups and organisations, working closely with the rail industry, to:

- Enhance the railways' contribution to local sustainable development and community wellbeing, including by maximising access to and use of the railways;
- Ensure the community has a voice and plays a part in the development and improvement of our railways, so this meets community needs and aspirations and delivers maximum benefit;
- Communicate the development and importance of our railways to communities, enhancing understanding and pride, and promoting rail as a key part of sustainable, healthy travel.

One facet of community rail's work is working with rail industry and other partners on some types of the infrastructure projects outlined in the terms of the inquiry, e.g. station upgrades. As such, we are submitting a short response to point 4. of the call for evidence, as set out below.

Answer to point 4: What role should the industry play in the development of this pipeline and how should government engage with industry in its delivery?

Our response does not relate to the specifics of investment in the supply chain and manufacturing sectors, but rather the rail industry more generally, and projects and enhancements to improve the network as a whole, e.g. station upgrades.

We would advocate that the government and rail industry work closely together, e.g. via the creation of Great British Railways, towards the stated aim of a unified and simplified rail system that relentlessly focuses on securing improved services for passengers and better value for money for taxpayers.

To generate the confidence needed to support stable rail investment pipelines, the government and rail industry need to collaborate to create an environment that helps to widen access to rail and maximises its use. Well-used trains and stations that meet local needs are the most cost-effective and economically sustainable, while simultaneously delivering significant social and environmental value.

Local engagement and strong community relations help to maximise use of the railways, by bringing people in, promoting awareness, positivity and confidence, and supporting the rail industry to better understand and respond to local needs. Community rail's success in these areas is well-evidenced through our recent 'Value of community rail' report (<https://communityrail.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/VoCR-report-24-FINAL-FOR-WEB.pdf>), which offers impact examples and other qualitative evidence of how the movement delivers demonstrable value for and with communities. Indeed, community rail's major return on investment of £17.89 for every £1 spent makes a clear case for its ongoing support in any relevant rail investment programme(s), by way of empowering collaboration, funding support and political buy-in, from the rail sector, government and wider partners, to allow it to further develop and thrive through the period of rail reform and into the future.

Community rail acts as a valued partner and critical friend to the rail industry, adding value to rail and transport developments, from major infrastructure schemes to service and timetable amendments, while also spearheading smaller-scale, community-led projects. Therefore, effectively engaging community rail as a partner should be a vital part of any localised rail investment projects/programmes. Effectively engaging communities can help to secure local buy-in and support, making rail more accessible and appealing, and creating a sense of empowerment and ownership towards local railways.

Better alignment and collaboration with local authorities, communities and other transport providers helps to maximise access to and use of rail, as well as delivering additional benefits from a financial point of view. Community rail experience shows how local collaboration tends to lead to a pooling of resources and funding/investment from various sources, ensuring

developments are better suited to local needs, and therefore more economical. This is especially relevant to stations and their development, where we have seen an array of examples of community-led projects to restore disused or dilapidated spaces, as well as smaller-scale projects, that bring in third party funding and combine partners' expertise and staffing resource and succeed in making stations more welcoming and inclusive. These types of projects tend to be complex and drawn out, however, and would benefit from a dedicated unit/team, e.g. within Great British Railways, to provide leadership and ownership on this issue, and to secure investment for such schemes.

We would therefore suggest that any investment programmes designed to improve the overall passenger experience of rail, e.g. stations development, infrastructure enhancements, accessibility improvements, would benefit from meaningful consultation and engagement with local rail partners, including community rail.

February 2025