

Community rail: placemaking and local identity

Written by Rob Lowson Edited by Jools Townsend

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Introduction and executive summary – by Jools Townsend, chief executive, Community Rail Network

The aim of this report, produced by Community Rail Network with support from Rail Delivery Group, is to explore the transformative role of the community rail movement in placemaking and fostering local identity across Britain's railways. It highlights how railways and stations can evolve from transport interchanges into vibrant, inclusive, culturally rich community assets delivering significant social, environmental and economic value.

Community rail is a unique and growing grassroots movement made up of 76 community rail partnerships (community-based organisations), 1,300 station volunteer groups, and other locally-led initiatives across Britain, engaging and empowering communities, and helping them get the most from their railways and stations.

Community rail promotes social inclusion and access to opportunity, sustainable travel and tourism, health and wellbeing, and local economic development. This involves working with train operators, the wider rail and transport sector, local authorities, educators, and community partners, to spearhead locally-led projects connected with rail, bring improvements to rail services and stations, and help communities have a voice on rail and transport.

Placemaking is a people-first approach that empowers communities to shape their environments, in this case embedding pride, heritage and social value into railway spaces. Through community engagement, cultural expression and economic development, this report finds that community rail partnerships and station groups provide demonstrable impact, helping rail to serve, reflect and celebrate the unique character of local places.

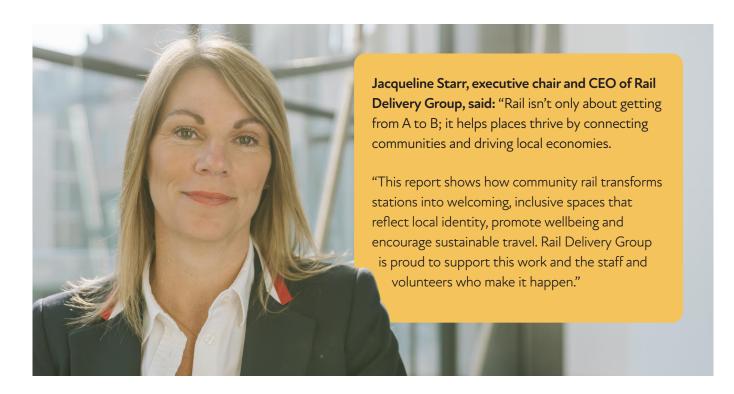


This report describes a wide range of initiatives – from art and music projects to heritage restorations and inclusive travel schemes – that illustrate how stations and railways can become hubs and facilitators of creativity, wellbeing and regeneration. It showcases the role of community rail in boosting sustainable tourism, supporting local economies and promoting inclusive access. It also highlights the impact of the Railway 200 campaign, which amplified community rail's efforts to commemorate railway history and connect people to place.

As we move forward with rail reform and the establishment of Great British Railways, this report offers practical recommendations for community rail and the rail industry, advocating for deep and meaningful community empowerment and engagement, celebration of local identity, and alignment with broader regeneration goals. It presents a compelling blueprint for how rail can enrich lives and strengthen communities through thoughtful, collaborative placemaking.

We look forward to continuing to work with government at all levels, rail and transport partners, and of course local communities, to create a rail network that reflects people and place, is tuned into communities' needs and aspirations, and is central to a sustainable transport future.









What is placemaking?

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Placemaking can empower communities to have a sense of belonging and pride in their local area as places change over time. 199

Placemaking is a term that can be interpreted in many ways, but at its heart, it is a community-orientated concept that is rooted in community participation.²

In this report, we focus on how communities – including via the community rail movement – have shaped their local railways, stations and station surroundings, ensuring they reflect the identity and character of the communities they serve, while also using the railway to develop a wider sense of place.

We explore how communities help to turn railway 'spaces' into railway 'places,' ³ enhancing physical locations by the social practices they host or encourage, and creating people-centred environments.

Some core components of placemaking relevant to the scope of this report include: ⁴

- Community engagement: Listening to and involving communities, to harness lived experience and break down barriers, ensure local railways and stations reflect communities' unique needs and aspirations, and create pride in place;
- Cultural identity: Exploring and celebrating local heritage, traditions and culture to create a strong sense of identity and connection to the area, emphasising the role rail can play in this;
- Economic development: Maximising the impact that railways and stations can have on tourism, local businesses, and the visitor and travel experience, boosting local economies and stimulating wider regeneration and inclusive economic development;
- Social interaction and wellbeing: Designing safe, inclusive spaces that encourage people to gather, meet, and engage with one another, strengthening social connections and community cohesion.

LGBT HERO adopters at Vauxhall Station





Placemaking and rail

Railway 200

The notion of rail connecting people, places and communities has been celebrated in 2025 through a year-long Railway 200 campaign, showcasing how the railway shaped and continues to shape national life.

Of the four key themes, two are of particular relevance to this report:

- Heritage, culture and tourism the historic impact of rail on the development of places and communities, its ongoing cultural significance and role as a driver for sustainable tourism and travel;
- Celebrating railway people highlighting the passion and dedication of those who make the railway what it is, including the work of volunteers such as the thousands in community rail.

Railway 200, and the ideas of placemaking and celebrating local identity, have been embraced by community rail and the movement has played a key role in the campaign. Community rail partnerships and groups have led on hundreds of events throughout 2025, highlighting how rail continues to connect communities and create civic pride.



Railway 200 at Winnersh Triangle Station

Stations as places

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Stations are part of the fabric of the community. It's therefore important that we think about stations as more than just places to take a train, but as civic spaces for us to engage with, building pride and connection, both historically and now.

As the recognition and importance of placemaking within rail grows, so does the acknowledgement of the importance of railways and stations as places that deliver social value and enhance people's lives. Stations are no longer treated as simply transport interchanges; they are seen as sites with the potential to create social good as true community hubs.

As the Government works to set up Great British Railways (GBR), and a railway that is focused on delivering for people and communities, there is strategic support for railways and stations to become strongly aligned with community aspirations and linked to a range of policy objectives.

Models put forward by Steer – via research commissioned by the Railway Industry Association (RIA) – show how stations can be developed as 'high-performing locations that support strong community identity and stimulate railway vibrancy and value.' ⁷ This chimes with insights from SLC, who suggest that rail reform, nationalisation and devolution present a unique opportunity to reimagine the role of railways and stations as community focal points, with developments led by communities and local authorities as the experts of their own wants and needs. ⁸



Suggested attributes and characteristics for 'community hub' stations can include:



Welcoming and inclusive to all



Attractive amenities and services



Visible human presence



Integrated with other transport networks



Reflects and makes a positive contribution to local identity

Steer's paper recommends effective engagement with communities, through community rail and GBR's partnership framework, to align local railways and stations with community needs and aspirations. This approach would help to ensure they deliver benefit for all members of the community, even those who are not rail users, via improved community services, or the facilitation of local economic activity.

If such benefits are realised, further RIA research ⁹ suggests stations could be reimagined as 'engines of economic, social and environmental value' within 'Station Investment Zones,' linking local placemaking with further investment in railways and stations to support Government priorities of more housing, jobs, and growth.





The value of rail

The evidence from Rail Delivery Group's (RDG) 'Beyond the Tracks' report ¹⁰ demonstrates both the value of rail to local economies, and the perceptions of communities that stations are vitally important in helping local areas and businesses thrive.



£98bn generated for local economies

Based on the 1.23 billion passenger journeys taken in 2023/23, this means that rail passengers could be contributing an estimated £98bn annually to local economies as part of their journey.



A third of passengers spend with independent businesses

A third of people stated that they usually spend money with independent businesses when travelling by rail. Stations have potential to play an increased role in their local area, supporting local businesses around them and on the high street and providing the services people want

The report found that beyond the financial impacts, there were more place-based benefits to local economies from railways and stations. The research showed that people care about stations and want them to play a significant part in showcasing their localities, creating opportunities, and boosting quality of life. As such, any growth in rail use could play a vital role in placemaking by shoring up the viability of local retailers, service providers and independent businesses, further embedding them in the communities they serve.

A large majority of rail customers (73%) see their local station as important to helping the local economy and businesses thrive

A further 51% of people agree that businesses in and around the station play an important role in their local community.

57% would like to see a greater presence of independent businesses in and around stations.





Placemaking and community rail

By its nature as a grassroots movement, community rail contributes to local placemaking via the myriad of ways it delivers social, environmental and economic value for and with communities. It's people-first approach is deep-rooted in the areas community rail partnerships and groups serve, encouraging and enabling many core elements of placemaking. This includes via effective community engagement, celebrating cultural identities, creative expression, economic development and regeneration, and improved social connectivity, health and wellbeing.



The local identity of an area helps to preserve traditions and provide confidence for future development. It offers a sense of home, place, security and community, and can be an important contributor to quality of life and inclusive, sustainable development. Community rail activities have successfully tapped into and celebrated local identity in many ways, helping to foster a sense of belonging and pride in the railway.

Celebrating uniqueness

There are now 76 community rail partnerships and 1,300 station groups across Britain, each one different. Every railway line and station has its own story to tell, and community rail takes great pride in celebrating and promoting these stories to as wide an audience as possible. They celebrate what is unique about the line, station, area, town or village they love and care for, using this uniqueness to create strong, vibrant communities.

This uniqueness may come from any combination of landscape, celebrated local people, language or dialect, architecture, the arts, cultural myths or stories, something that place started or gave to the world, or anything that connects its past, present and future. Community rail seizes on such opportunities, particularly where this uniqueness is linked to the railway.



Artwork for Shotton Station

But even if not, community rail can often use station environments or rail-related activities to showcase what makes their area special.

Examples from community rail include Marston Vale Line CRP installing special vinyl markings on trains used on the line, visually highlighting the countryside the line runs through from Bedford to Bletchley, and exhibitions such as at Ely Station, celebrating its famous cathedral and Oliver Cromwell's House. The Friends of Strines Station created a series of railway walks showcasing locations believed to have inspired Edith Nesbit's classic book, the Railway Children, while the Friends of Buxton Station's 'Unhailed Trail' celebrates achievements of the town's lesser-known influencers, including Frank Soo, the only man of Chinese heritage to play football for England.

Groups have ensured a legacy for individuals who have a special place in the hearts of areas, such as the Friends of Batley Station's memorial to the late MP Jo Cox, who was its co-founder and former vice-chair. There has even been a specially-created beer, with the Abbey Line CRP celebrating Railway 200 and their own 20th anniversary by commissioning the Abbey Flyer, an ale dedicated to the affectionate nickname for the branch line running from Watford Junction to St Albans Abbey Station, and the peregrine falcons that nest on St Albans Cathedral.



CASE STUDY: South East Lancashire CRP - Wiganese Murals



The Wigan Murals are a powerful example of placemaking celebrating uniqueness of place through community-led art. Spearheaded by South East Lancashire Community Rail Partnership (SELCRP), they have transformed Wigan North Western Station into a vibrant cultural landmark.

The first mural, led by local artist Jess Riley, featured an A to Z of "Wiganese" – phrases and words unique to the town – gathered from thousands of residents via community workshops, social media, and public submissions. This inclusive approach fostered local pride and identity, turning a previously blank underpass into a joyful, welcoming space.

Building on this success, a second mural titled Wonders of Wigan showcased historical and modern images of 25 key landmarks, including Haigh Hall and Wigan Pier. Created with input from local photographers and residents, the mural celebrates Wigan's architectural heritage and its role in railway history, marking Railway 200. QR codes provide stories behind each site, deepening public engagement.

Together, these murals exemplify placemaking by embedding community voices into public space, enhancing the station's atmosphere, and strengthening connections between people and place. They not only improve the station's aesthetic environment but also serve as cultural reference points that reflect Wigan's past, present, and collective spirit.



Commemorating railway history

Re-connecting people to places through history can help to bring those places to life in the present day and foster a collective identity to stimulate more connected communities. ¹² By understanding the history of how a place has evolved, its future development can be designed in ways that feel both appropriate and enduring. ¹³

Where railway history has played a key role in the growth and development of communities, it can help to enrich the narrative of those places, showing how they came to be. This can act as a driver for community engagement, empowering communities and individuals to weave stories of local rail and stations into a collective narrative that resonates with people and embeds a sense of place. This is also seen via the preservation or restoration of railway architecture and design, maintaining the status of railways and stations as the landmarks they were and continue to be.

Community rail marks the importance of railway history in many ways, often using stations as bases to promote and display the ways in which rail has contributed to placemaking and local heritage. This includes events and exhibitions, such as Community Rail Lancashire's

'On Track – A Glimpse into Lancashire's Railways Past and Present' exhibit at Clitheroe Castle Museum, and Gloucestershire CRP's photographic exhibition highlighting the contribution of the local Black community to the county's rail network post-World War II.

History and place are also celebrated via heritage panels and displays, such as the 200 blue plaques erected by Southeast Communities Rail Partnership for Railway 200 to highlight people and places with a connection to the development of the railways. Or educational activities, like the children taken on bespoke 'try the train' trips by the Platform Rail Education scheme to learn about Isambard Kingdom Brunel and his building of the Great Western Railway.

The movement's affiliation with railway history is also illustrated via an array of projects to preserve rail's architectural grandeur, including the Friends of Bishopstone Station's conversion of a 1930's former parcels office at the Grade II-listed station into a community hub and events space, and the restoration of original railway features by the Wherry Lines CRP such as 'running in boards' for Lowestoft and West Runton stations.

Gloucestershire CRP





CASE STUDY: Community Rail Cumbria and Workington Focus Group – The Rails Which Circled the World

The Rails Which Circled the World project at Workington Station demonstrates placemaking via the transformation of a transport hub into a cultural landmark. Led by Community Rail Cumbria and local partners, the initiative celebrates Workington's industrial heritage, particularly its Moss Bay Steelworks global role in rail production, through a compelling outdoor exhibition. Seventeen large heritage panels, a locally-sourced limestone sculpture of steel pioneer Henry Bessemer, and restored station features, such as LMS colours and heritage benches, collectively reimagine the station as a space of memory, identity and learning.

The project fosters community engagement by incorporating personal stories from former steelworkers, screening films in waiting rooms,

and hosting educational visits, such as those from the University of Hertfordshire. These elements invite both locals and visitors to connect with Workington's past, encouraging reflection and pride. The exhibition also supports wellbeing, offering older generations a nostalgic experience that may aid those living with dementia and other conditions.

By embedding history into the station's physical and social fabric, the project not only enhances the aesthetic and emotional value of the space but also positions Workington Station as a destination in its own right.





Building pride and positivity

Community rail creates pride in place and pride in the railway, celebrating and strengthening the role of railways and stations in community life. This is enabled by meaningful engagement with local communities, giving them a voice to inform and influence rail's development locally.

When people feel they have been part of the process of shaping their environment, they develop a deeper connection to and pride in their local area. This is why taking a people-first, co-production approach to placemaking is so vital, to empower communities in the collaborative process of creating places that reflect their culture, history and identity.

Pride in place is evident in station settings via messaging that welcomes you and says, 'we are here,' often accompanied by images of local landscapes and landmarks.

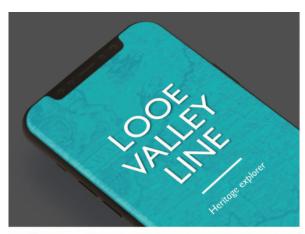
One such example is the 'We Are Nottingham' mural at that city's station, co-created by a local youth group alongside the Poacher Line and Robin Hood Line CRPs, the latter itself named as its line passes through areas associated with the legendary heroic outlaw.

A sense of pride in place, and the desire to promote those places to a wider audience, is also often the basis for community rail communications, promotional campaigns and events. This was typified by the Highland Mainline CRP's 'Highland Fling' event, which saw a 'flash mob' of more than 100 volunteers, young singers and dancers, and Atholl Highlander pipers descend on Kings Cross Station. The partnership's key driver is highlighting the heritage and history of the line to encourage sustainable tourism by rail, and the event helped them engage with more than 6,300 people, 80% saying they had been encouraged to visit the area by train.





CASE STUDY: Looe Valley Line Heritage Project













The Looe Valley Heritage Project, devised by Devon & Cornwall Rail Partnership, shows how storytelling, technology and community collaboration can be used to create pride in place. Focused on the historic Looe Valley Line in Cornwall, the initiative aimed to enrich the visitor experience and promote the line to prospective rail travellers by celebrating the railway's 150-year legacy. It transformed the line into a cultural destination by embedding heritage into physical and digital spaces.

Key features included interactive 'augmented reality' interpretation boards at stations, talking portraits, a mobile app offering historical insights, and a mini-documentary series that received more than 10,000 views. Community involvement was central, with local residents contributing memories through interviews and events, ensuring the narrative reflected authentic voices.

Promotional activity included a film premiere event, social media outreach, and cross-platform integration, encouraging exploration and connection. The app and films turned a train ride into a meaningful cultural experience, and the project was the catalyst for the creation of a heritage centre at Liskeard Station, with a photographic exhibition and recreations of the station's original ticket office and waiting room.

By blending heritage, innovation, and community input, the project created a genuine sense of identity and pride, all hallmarks of successful placemaking.



Community rail and culture

Cultural or creative placemaking uses art, music, poetry, and storytelling to express local identity and bring places to life. By involving creative practitioners and celebrating heritage, communities turn spaces into meaningful places. As some describe it: place equals space plus meaning, with that meaning shaped by the stories created and shared.¹⁴

Art

The approach of art-based placemaking is not just limited to creating a visual appeal, it also generates an emotional connection between people and places. ¹⁵

Community rail and art is a natural fit, as stations lend themselves to becoming creative hubs, given they are central, neutral, recognisable spaces where a range of people come and go. They often offer affordable space in the heart of local communities, bringing visibility that can showcase arts and culture to people who might not normally visit a gallery or museum, therefore opening up exhibits and displays to a wider audience. ¹⁶

Several artworks have been created to celebrate Railway 200, such as displays depicting rail through the ages at Leamington Spa by Heart of England CRP, and Barton-Cleethorpes CRP's 'Art Along the Line' project, which includes a mural outlining how Cleethorpes Station has developed over time.

Ware Station, New River Line CRP

As well as celebrating rail and its place in society, art is powerful within community rail in terms of youth engagement and intergenerational activity, such as the new display at Shotton, coordinated by the Conwy Valley & North Wales Coast CRP, which was co-created by a local primary school and residents of ClwydAlyn's Llys Eleanor, an independent living scheme for older people. Such projects generate pride in place, and a sense that stations should be respected and valued by all. As well as creating cultural value, many also serve to create safer spaces and tackle anti-social behaviour, such as the colourful community-led underpass, or 'Wonderpass,' at Meldreth Station.

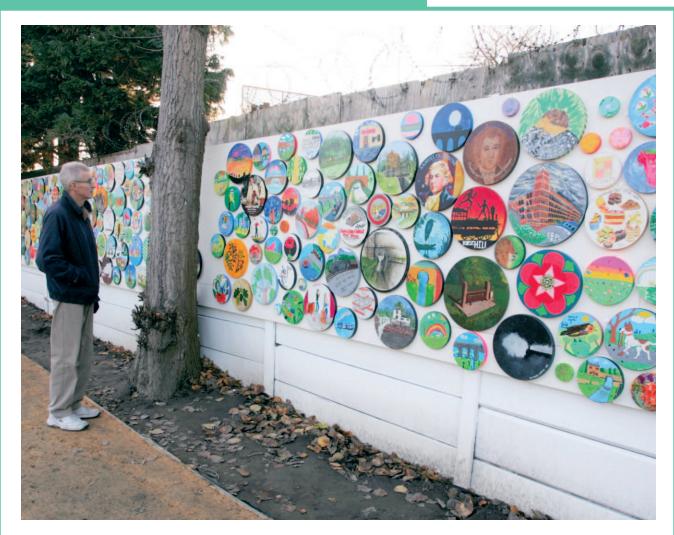
Art within community rail also often gives a voice to marginalised groups, allowing them to contribute their ideas and perspectives to railway places and what they mean to them, and signalling that stations and the railway are inclusive spaces for all. Recent projects have included:

- The Queer Art Trail, promoting work by the LGBTQ+ community along the Tyne Valley and Cumbrian Coast CRP lines;
- Mosaics at Rye House and Ware stations on the New River Line CRP, produced by a group of local carers and a charity supporting adults with learning disabilities;
- Artwork co-created by the local refugee community and Severnside CRP at Bath Spa Railway Station, and;
- An exhibition at Wrexham Station by 3 Counties
 Connected CRP and members of local homeless
 charities exploring the theme of 'cynefin' a sense of place.





CASE STUDY: Friends of Rose Hill Station – Intergenerational art project



The Friends of Rose Hill Station in Marple initiated an inter-generational community art project as a placemaking effort to revitalise the station and strengthen local identity. Recognising a disconnect between age groups, a lack of shared community spaces, and low civic engagement, the group devised a mural project that brought together over 300 residents, from toddlers to a 100-year-old.

The mural, composed of painted discs, depicted Marple's past and present, celebrating its landscapes, industries, and daily life, with themes including 'You, Marple Life and Trains,' and 'Marple People – Then and Now.'

By transforming a bare concrete wall into a bright community canvas, the project turned the station into a cultural landmark and focal point of pride. It fostered collaboration across generations, encouraged sustainable travel, and enhanced the station's role as a social hub. The initiative also included workshops and storytelling sessions, deepening connections and preserving local heritage. The mural's unveiling drew over 200 attendees, highlighting its success in creating a shared sense of place. A resource booklet extended the project's legacy and continued the development and promotion of community cohesion. This project illustrates placemaking by using art to activate public space, build relationships, and reflect the unique character of Marple.



Music and drama

Music and drama's role in cultural exchange is well-established as a way to share insights into different ways of life, promoting understanding and connectivity among diverse communities, and providing imagery to guide people through their physical surroundings. ¹⁷

When used in collective, community-based engagement, music and drama can be effective participatory tools for expressing and sustaining a community's unique cultural identity, giving voice to its history and values. As with other cultural activities, people engaging in music and drama can also form new friendships, strengthen relationships, and develop a stronger sense of social and community cohesion. ¹⁸

Music is a great way to engage young people with rail, and many community rail partnerships and groups have used songs as a basis for projects. For example, the Bishop Line CRP's 'Our Line Connections' saw local young people create songs about what local places

along the line meant to them, while schoolchildren in Brampton in Cumbria marked Railway 200 by creating a song about Brampton Station and Thomas Edmondson, its stationmaster in 1836 and a pioneer of railway ticketing.

Music and drama also offer insights into folklore and traditions of places, celebrating what makes them special. This can be seen with the range of music trains organised across the network, including those by the Essex and South Suffolk CRP, championing the culture of the communities they serve through sea shanty and Cockney singalong trains. Drama can also be used to promote landscapes and their people, such as the West Highland Line CRP's 'Benighted on the Moor' audio play, and High Peak & Hope Valley CRP's youth theatre performance celebrating the life of Peak District activist Ethel Haythornthwaite, a key figure in saving the Hope Valley Line and developing thinking about protecting nature and landscapes everywhere.





CASE STUDY: Track Record Arts: The Soundtrack to the Severn Beach Line – Severnside CRP



Track Record Arts is a placemaking initiative that creatively reimagined the Severn Beach Line in Bristol through a fusion of ambient jazz and poetry. Spearheaded by local artists Eyebrow and The Spoke, and supported by Severnside CRP, the project transformed the railway journey into a cultural experience that people could download and enjoy. Each station inspired a unique musical track and poem, reflecting the area's diverse landscapes – urban, rural, industrial and picturesque.

Crucially, the poetry emerged from workshops held within communities with limited cultural access, empowering residents to share memories and connect with their local environment.

This participatory approach fostered a deeper sense of place and belonging, turning the railway into a shared canvas for storytelling and artistic expression.

The project culminated in immersive events like a 'silent disco' train ride with 120 passengers, and a festival performance, drawing hundreds of participants and reinforcing the line's identity as a cultural asset. Even during the COVID lockdown, the soundtrack's popularity grew, allowing people to experience the feel of the railway journey from their own home.

By blending music, art, memory and mobility, Track Record exemplifies placemaking, revitalising public space through community engagement and creative interpretation, and offering a replicable model for other rail-linked cultural initiatives.



Cultural heritage

Local railways and stations become more than just infrastructure and buildings when they absorb and reflect the character and culture of the places they serve. Successfully capturing the cultural heritage of an area engages people as it gives a demonstrable nod to the pride they have in the place they live and its history.

Culture and heritage can provide the 'glue' for placemaking and can unlock pride in place, but taking a co-production approach with communities can take this further, being especially valuable in building a shared and inclusive vision for an area or station. When a community feels that its culture and heritage are respected and incorporated into development projects, it is more likely to buy in to it and participate. This is particularly key to regeneration, with culture-led regeneration initiatives being most effective when they draw on the unique culture and heritage of a place and its communities. ^{19, 20}

In community rail, we see cultural heritage playing a central role in placemaking in projects, such as the restoration and transformation of former railway buildings. Such schemes not only add character and cultural richness to stations, but bring spaces back into productive use, spurring wider regeneration and creating spaces with a key role to play at the heart of communities.

A predominant example of this is the Grade II-listed station house at Ridgmont on the Marston Vale Line being brought back into use as a heritage centre and tea room, offering employment and volunteering opportunities as well as becoming a visitor attraction in its own right. Another is the restoration by the Bricket Wood Station Heritage Trust of the sole remaining 'steam age' station building on the Watford to St Albans Abbey line into an Edwardian style tearoom and community space, which now also houses the village archive and hosts weekly drop-in study sessions by the local history society.

Evidence suggests that community involvement in stations and railway spaces by community rail results in place transformation and a sense of 'placefullness.' ²¹ This community appropriation leads to an increased sense of ownership, by which a sense of place is firmly engendered and developed.







CASE STUDY: Restoration of Haltwhistle station buildings

The renovation of Haltwhistle Station, led by Tyne Valley CRP, showcases placemaking through adaptive reuse and community-focused design. By restoring the station's historic wooden buildings, which date back to the 1900s, the project preserved local heritage while introducing modern functionality.

These revitalised spaces now serve as affordable studios and offices for exhibitions and small businesses, and the CRP runs the 1861 station water tower as a community café and events space. The multi-use set-up fosters creativity and economic development, and the transformation has also enhanced passenger facilities, creating a welcoming, accessible environment.

Placemaking is further evident in the integration of cultural elements, such as art exhibitions themed around nearby world heritage site Hadrian's Wall

and the local identity of Haltwhistle. These displays, some curated by the community group Zig Zag, which supports people who feel isolated due to disability, unemployment, or poor mental health, actively engage residents and celebrate the area's unique character. The installation of a human sundial on the forecourt adds educational and historical interest, linking the station to the railway's broader influence on timekeeping.

The project's emphasis on sustainability, inclusivity and cultural expression has turned Haltwhistle Station into a vibrant community hub. It not only improves the travel experience but strengthens social ties and civic pride, demonstrating how thoughtful placemaking can regenerate spaces, encourage greater community involvement in stations, and enrich local life.





Community rail, tourism and local economies

Tourism

Placemaking helps to create vibrant destinations that appeal to everyone, and as such, benefits tourism by creating unique, marketable identities for places, attracting visitors seeking authentic, memorable experiences.²²

Community rail plays a vital role in promoting sustainable tourism by rail and placemaking simultaneously. It encourages people to use the train to explore and enjoy everything Britain offers, and is uniquely placed to share local stories, insights and histories to inspire more sustainable rail-based journeys.

With a growing emphasis on sustainable rail-based leisure and tourism travel, community rail partnerships and groups are leveraging their knowledge and networks to attract visitors and support local economies. They are increasingly working with partners, such as tourist attractions, national parks, and destination marketing organisations, e.g. "Visit" bodies, to create integrated and appealing travel experiences.

A common activity involves producing line guides that highlight cultural, historical and natural attractions accessible by rail. These guides not only encourage exploration by sustainable means but foster economic vitality in communities along the routes. Initiatives like discount ticketing and shared promotional platforms further incentivise rail travel to local destinations, increasing the number of people using rail.

The community rail movement has increasingly embraced digital platforms to reach wider audiences and promote rail-accessible destinations. A recent example of this is Devon & Cornwall Rail Partnership developing their Bus Branch Line videos, a series of short travelogue-style films, and Scenic Walks from the Railway, all heavily promoted on social media.

Some community rail partnerships and groups have developed a collaborative approach to projects, working together across localities to have a bigger impact 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', in which all community rail partnerships across Wales and Borders joined forces with partners including the country's heritage railways to promote tourism using public transport.

Devon & Cornwall Rail Partnership





CASE STUDY: Bilingual Audio Guide - Cambrian Railway Partnership

The Window Seater app connects rail travellers to the world beyond. Led by the Cambrian Railway Partnership, the app for the Cambrian Line immerses passengers in local communities through place-based audio storytelling. It transforms the journey into a placemaking experience, where travellers engage with the cultural, historical, and linguistic identity of places they pass through.

Local storytellers contributed narratives that reflect the unique character of the Cambrian Line, encouraging deeper connections between visitors and the places they encounter. Collaborations with organisations like Cors Dyfi Nature Reserve further rooted the project in local sustainability and conservation efforts. The guide's accessibility features, including transcripts for d/Deaf and blind

users, broaden its reach and impact, and it is also bilingual, featuring authentic narration and Welsh language elements to foster cultural appreciation and inclusivity.

By promoting sustainable travel and encouraging exploration beyond the train window, the project supports local economies and aligns with national placemaking goals. Its success has inspired interest in replicating the model across Wales and Borders, reinforcing the role of storytelling in shaping meaningful, place-based travel experiences. Users have reported being encouraged to visit other destinations, using links from Wales on Rails, a joint venture by all Welsh community rail partnerships to promote sustainable rail-based tourism.





Supporting local economies

Placemaking can support businesses and boost local economies in a variety of ways. It can increase visitor numbers, and therefore spending in, different areas, attract interest and investment, and potentially drive employment opportunities.²³ Community rail promotions tend to especially focus on small and independent businesses which tend to keep visitor spending within local communities. As RDG's research demonstrates, stimulating vibrant 'micro economies' around the rail estate is particularly important for small and independent businesses and their ability to flourish.

By taking a place-based, 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.

Within community rail there are various examples of projects that support local economic development and regeneration, working with and promoting local businesses. For example, a joint scheme by the Bittern Line Community Rail Partnership and Sheringham Chamber of Trade and Commerce saw rail passengers given special discount rates for 35 businesses and attractions in the town.

Community rail also supports local economies through themed retail trails that highlight hidden gems, such as bookshops, record stores and cafés. For example, the Friends of Buxton Station's Rail Retail Trail was central to the 'Buxton Kickstart' post-pandemic recovery.

Others, like Settle-Carlisle CRP, build long-term relationships with local suppliers for catering, marketing and merchandise. Partnerships also promote placemaking through social enterprises, such as Rail 74 CRP's station-based art and pop-up projects that support ethical businesses and tackle social deprivation. Transforming stations into multi-use hubs is also powerful for combining placemaking and economic development. Community rail can help develop business cases and find tenants for disused spaces, like Hampshire CRP's conversion of Shawford Station's long-unused waiting room into Platform 1, a vibrant community café and space.

Friends of Buxton Station





CASE STUDY: Heart of Wales - Make and Trade



The Make and Trade initiative along the Heart of Wales Line embodies placemaking by connecting local businesses, communities and the railway to support sustainable rural economies. Through their Goods Along the Line brochure, launched at the Royal Welsh Show, the Heart of Wales Line CRP showcases over 100 independent makers and traders. This not only promotes local enterprise but strengthens the identity and appeal of towns and villages along the route.

By encouraging collaboration among producers, retailers and craftspeople, the project cultivates a sense of place rooted in shared values and local expertise. Networking events and trade fairs create opportunities for peer learning and visibility, empowering micro-businesses to thrive despite

limited resources. The railway becomes a conduit for economic and social connection, reinforcing its role in community life.

The initiative supports placemaking by enhancing local character, celebrating innovative and unique makers and traders who are deeply embedded in their communities, and all linked by the railway. It also encourages rail-based tourism and promotes regional pride. As the brochure evolves through sponsorship and advertising, it continues to build a resilient business network that reflects the uniqueness of each location along the line, making the railway not just a mode of transport, but a catalyst for community-led regeneration.



Regeneration

Placemaking aids regeneration by focusing on community collaboration to transform public spaces into vibrant, functional and meaningful places that benefit people and their environment.²⁴ By engaging the community in strategic placemaking ²⁵ – geared at more long-term, common goals – projects can be tailored to the unique needs and character of an area.

Community rail acts as a catalyst for inclusive, sustainable regeneration and place-based prosperity by integrating elements such as tourism promotion, station regeneration, business engagement and community empowerment. Evidence shows that across the movement's range of activities, community rail delivers significant social value, with a return on investment of £17.89 for every £1 spent.²⁶

Community rail partnerships actively support local transport strategies, working closely with local authorities to ensure rail's potential in development and sustainable mobility is recognised. Their advisory role helps to integrate rail into broader regeneration plans, while their ability to bring together transport

and community stakeholders enables funding and implementation of locally-led projects such as modal integration schemes.

The participatory nature of community rail in itself helps to foster pride, resilience and local networks, which in turn stimulate regeneration, enterprise and economic development. Partnerships and groups contribute to tourism, leisure and education by improving access and enhancing local environments, with stations transformed into community hubs, serving as focal points for social and economic activity.

A notable example is Community Rail Cumbria's redevelopment of Millom Station. By bringing buildings that been derelict for many years back into public use, the station has been transformed to incorporate the Millom Heritage and Arts Centre, a community-run museum and educational space. This initiative has spurred wider regeneration, going beyond the station itself, now boasting a café, gift shop and ticket office run as a social enterprise, spreading into the wider town, which had previously experienced post-industrial decline and deprivation.

Millom Station





CASE STUDY: Lowestoft Central Project

Lowestoft Station's transformation exemplifies placemaking through community-led regeneration. After the removal of its main roof in 1992, the station became disconnected and partially derelict. In 2017, the Lowestoft Central Project, coordinated by station adopters and the Wherry Lines CRP, was launched to revitalise the site.

Collaborating with a host of local and rail industry partners, the group reimagined the station as a vibrant community hub. Placemaking initiatives included restoring heritage features, improving accessibility, and converting the long-abandoned parcels office into a modern exhibition venue.

The station now hosts events, exhibitions and festivals, with the CRP playing a leading role in the town's annual Heritage Open Days Festival, which attracts thousands of visitors and boosts the local economy by around £180,000.

The project also facilitated inclusive tours of Lowestoft's historic signal box before its closure, enhancing public engagement with railway heritage.

Through over 1,000 volunteer hours, the station has been reconnected to the town centre, reducing antisocial behaviour and fostering civic pride. Permanent installations and events, such as the Kindertransport interpretation panel and annual civic service of remembrance for Holocaust Memorial Day, and the annual summer reunion of World War II evacuees involving Lowestoft and Glossop stations, further embed the station's historical and present day significance into the fabric of the community.

Lowestoft Station's revival demonstrates how placemaking can turn neglected infrastructure into a cultural and social asset, strengthening local identity and encouraging sustained community involvement.





Community rail and stations as places

Safe, inclusive stations

Placemaking contributes to safe and inclusive spaces by focusing on community needs and values, which fosters a sense of ownership and belonging. It promotes safety and inclusivity by ensuring that places are both physically accessible and socially welcoming to diverse groups.²⁷

Community rail plays a vital role by transforming railway stations into accessible, inclusive spaces. This approach goes beyond infrastructure, aiming to empower communities, especially marginalised and disabled groups, and non-rail users, to identify and overcome barriers and engage with rail travel confidently and comfortably.

A key barrier to rail access for disabled individuals is navigating stations and their surroundings. While large-scale infrastructure upgrades are led by the rail industry, community rail partnerships and groups contribute local insight and lived experience to guide smaller, impactful improvements. Examples include Tyne Valley CRP's work connecting platforms to accessible walking and cycle paths and conducting inclusive station surveys.

Projects like Gloucestershire's 'Let's Talk Travel' and Access and Active Travel Maps exemplify inclusive placemaking by identifying accessible routes and highlighting features such as pavement gradients and pinch points. At Buxton Station, adaptations for people with non-visible disabilities, like dementia-friendly signage, led by the station friends' group, demonstrate how thoughtful design can reduce anxiety and foster ease of use.

Beyond physical access, inclusive placemaking involves creating station environments that promote social interaction and community pride. Initiatives include wildlife and sensory gardens, such as those at Westerfield and Largs, which support wellbeing and social inclusion through accessible gardening spaces, and talking benches, such as those installed by Essex and South Suffolk Community Rail Partnership, which share local stories and encourage conversation and social interaction.

There are also accessible art displays, like the Finger Spelling project by Action Stations Bingley and Crossflatts in West Yorkshire, and the 'In Our Hands' BSL photography project at Patchway Station, both of which celebrate diversity and promote relationships with the deaf community.

Central to these efforts is the principle of co-design – a 'nothing about us, without us' approach – ensuring people with lived experience are involved from the outset in shaping projects and solutions. This participatory concept aligns with broader goals of social mobility, representation, and equity in placemaking and transport planning.

'In Our Hands' BSL photography project, Patchway Station





CASE STUDY: Hampshire Community Rail Partnership and Winchester GoLD – Travel with Confidence



Hampshire CRP and South Western Railway developed the 'Travel with Confidence' project to support adults with non-visible disabilities and those lacking rail confidence, working with those groups to highlight stations as inclusive spaces for all.

One of the groups involved was Winchester GoLD, a charity that supports adults with learning disabilities to live full and independent lives. The project developed to enable GoLD to deliver a mentoring programme for other local organisations, charities and day care centres.

GoLD members were skilled up as 'travel trainers,' and supported by staff and volunteers, led on the delivery of the programme, with 110 people from eight groups of their peers enjoying more than 30 trips by train.

The training consisted of station visits, try the train trips, and classroom sessions. Having benefitted

from a supported, positive experience of rail travel and station environments by the CRP, GoLD members used their experiences of common travel barriers and ways they can be overcome to teach others. They used cue cards with simple visuals to talk groups through the processes of buying tickets, using station help points, using ramps to board and alight trains, and what to do in the events of delays or cancellations.

The project was the first time Winchester GoLD had been involved in a scheme shaped and led by participants, and the growth in confidence of its members was described as 'immeasurable.'

Acting as travel trainers not only allowed members to pass on vital travel knowledge to support groups with similar needs, it also developed vital life skills including communication, leadership and social skills.



Stations as community hubs

Community hubs are vital to placemaking because they provide a physical and social focal point that builds cohesion, civic engagement, and a sense of belonging. They act as a central access point for services, and importantly, serve as a catalyst for social connections and interactions, bringing diverse groups together, fostering local development, and increasing community confidence and pride.²⁸

Within community rail, railway stations are increasingly being transformed into vibrant community hubs that go far beyond their traditional role. They support initiatives that help individuals broaden their networks, access education and employment, and improve health and wellbeing. This transformation is driven largely by the station adoption movement, which now covers half of Britain's stations with more than 1,300 stations adopted across the network.

These hubs contribute to the development of social capital, the networks and spaces that make communities resilient and sustainable. By offering training programmes, such as digital skills workshops at Llandudno Station supported by the Conwy Valley & North Wales Coast CRP, community hubs empower individuals and stimulate local development.

Stations are also increasingly evolving into 'mobility hubs' to support sustainable, inclusive end-to-end journeys. Such travel hubs are designed to accommodate and promote multi-modal trips, offering seamless, accessible connections between rail and buses, trams, community transport, shared mobility schemes, and walking, wheeling and cycling. Coordinating integrated travel and encouraging and enabling modal shift is a developing focus area for community rail, and can be seen in recent projects such as those promoting rail and bus links at Glossop Station, rail and onward active travel options at Seaford, and on-demand rail/bus 'shuttle' services at Wareham and Great Yarmouth.

As the community rail activities they stimulate and host become ever more varied, stations are constantly evolving into dynamic placemaking environments. Although some technical and regulatory barriers to community involvement remain, they are increasingly acting as catalysts for human connection, creativity, opportunity and mobility, reinforcing the idea that transport spaces can be reimagined as inclusive, multifunctional community assets. This evolution not only enhances the stations themselves but also contributes significantly to the broader social and economic wellbeing of the areas they serve.

Seaford Station





CASE STUDY: Kent CRP and the Hollingbourne Station Community Hub



The transformation of Hollingbourne Railway Station's disused ticket office and booking hall into a vibrant community hub demonstrates many elements of successful placemaking. After 32 years of neglect, the building was revitalised through a collaborative effort involving Kent CRP, Hollingbourne station adopters, Southeastern Railway, the Railway Heritage Trust, local businesses and Hollingbourne Parish Council.

The initiative responded to the village's loss of communal spaces, including its last-remaining local shop, and aimed to reimagine the station as a multifunctional hub, hosting events, a café, and somewhere to buy daily essentials.

Community engagement was central to the project's success. Open days, surveys and local outreach generated strong support from hundreds of locals, leading to the formation of a Community Interest Company to manage operations.

The refurbishment respected the building's heritage while modernising it for accessibility and utility. Events like cinema nights, board game afternoons, a rail travel training event for guide dogs, and seasonal celebrations have since activated the space, fostering social cohesion.

The Signal Box Café now serves locals and visitors, with plans to expand services and create "The Pantry" community shop. Positioned near popular walking and cycling routes, the hub is also promoted as an active travel destination for those wishing to explore the Kent Downs National Landscape.

Hollingbourne Station's rebirth highlights how placemaking can preserve heritage, meet community needs, and create a sustainable, inclusive public space.



Stations as forces for social good

Placemaking can address issues that contribute to social inequalities and exclusion by offering reflective, collaborative, community-led solutions.²⁹ Actively engaging with and listening to communities to understand and respond to their needs and priorities is crucial to this.³⁰

Stations, due to their visibility, familiarity and perceived neutrality, serve as ideal platforms for outreach, regeneration and recovery.

For example, the Kilmarnock Station Railway Heritage Trust has repurposed unused station spaces to support individuals facing mental health challenges, addiction, and loneliness. Through referrals from agencies like the NHS, the Trust employs a social prescribing model that promotes whole-community recovery.

The 'Rail to Roots' gardening group, who came together with the support of Marston Vale CRP to develop a wellbeing garden at Ridgmont Station, includes volunteers who became involved via local social prescribing services, and who have since emphasised the value of learning new skills and enjoying improved mental and physical health.

Similarly, the Cumbrian Coast Line CRP's 'Rail Journey to Recovery' project uses station adoption activities to aid rehabilitation for people with addiction issues. These initiatives build self-esteem, foster social interaction, and help individuals reconnect with society.

Research has highlighted the unique potential of stations to drive positive social change. Their strategic location and community-facing nature make them effective tools for influencing regeneration and delivering social and economic benefits. Community rail, with its deep understanding of local issues, is well-positioned to leverage these spaces for maximum impact. ³¹

By encouraging collective responsibility and ownership, placemaking transforms stations into hubs of connection and wellbeing, reinforcing the railway's role as a vital instrument for creating and maximising social value.



Cumbrian Coast Line 'Rail Journey to Recovery'



CASE STUDY: Community Rail Lancashire, Stations of Welcome, and South East Lancs CRP, Stations of Sanctuary



Rail Lancashire based at Accrington Station. The group, which is the first Muslim women's group to adopt a station in the country, works to make the environment pleasant and welcoming through activities like gardening and public art, and by transforming the station into a hub for community and sustainability. They use their placemaking activities to show how confident access to stations and train travel can lead to greater independence and increased civic engagement. Alongside their projects at the station, the group has participated in wider activity to raise the profile of Muslim women in Lancashire such as World Hijab Day, the Ramadan Water Project, autism, menopause and diabetes awareness sessions, as well as fundraising and collections for medical aid in Gaza and flood victims in Pakistan.

The ethos behind the group is also linked to South East Lancs CRP's 'Stations of Sanctuary' project, which aims to support refugees and asylum seekers by creating a more welcoming environment at stations. The CRP completed a pilot project with Bolton City of Sanctuary to become the first official 'Station of Sanctuary' on the network, resulting in improvements to information and signposting, community artwork and a 'Welcome to Bolton' mural, alongside the development of a staff training booklet, resource pack and a system of accreditation for other stations to consider how they support service users from a variety of ethnic backgrounds.



Conclusion and recommendations

This report has explored the transformative role of community rail in placemaking, demonstrating how railways and stations can evolve from transport interchanges into vibrant, inclusive, culturally rich, and economically stimulating community assets. At the heart of this transformation is a people-first approach that empowers communities to come together and shape their local environments, fostering pride, identity, and social cohesion.

Placemaking within rail is multifaceted. It encompasses community engagement, cultural expression, economic development, and the celebration of local heritage. Community rail partnerships and station groups have shown how rail spaces can reflect the unique character of the areas they serve, turning stations into gateways to local identity. Through art, music, storytelling, and history, these groups have embedded meaning into railway spaces, creating places that resonate with residents and visitors alike.

2025's Railway 200 campaign has shone a light on these efforts, providing a national platform to celebrate the historical and cultural significance of rail. Community rail's contributions to this campaign through events, exhibitions, and creative projects have reinforced the idea that railways are not only connectors of places but also custodians of local stories and catalysts for civic pride.

Stations have increasingly become community hubs, offering spaces for social interaction, wellbeing, enterprise and mobility. Projects illustrate how community-led design can regenerate neglected infrastructure, stimulate local economies and enhance quality of life. These initiatives demonstrate the potential of stations to act as engines of social, economic and environmental value.

Inclusivity is a cornerstone of successful placemaking. Community rail has championed accessible design and co-production, ensuring that stations are welcoming to all, and places that can foster empowerment, independence and community engagement.

Tourism and local economies also benefit significantly from placemaking. Community rail's promotion of sustainable travel, local attractions, and independent businesses has helped to boost visitor numbers and support economic resilience. Collaborative campaigns and digital storytelling have extended the reach of these efforts, encouraging exploration and investment in rail-linked destinations.

As rail continues to evolve, the lessons from community rail placemaking offer a compelling blueprint for future development. By placing people at the centre of planning and design, and by celebrating the distinctiveness of place, railways can continue to enrich lives, strengthen communities, and build a more inclusive and positive future.

We hope the following principles of working and recommendations are useful for increasing the impact of placemaking for those within community rail and rail.



Essex and South Suffolk CRP



Recommendations for community rail:

• Deepen community engagement

Actively involve local people in shaping station environments and rail services through effective engagement activities, adopting co-production principles as much as possible. This builds ownership, pride, and relevance;

Celebrate local identity

Use stations and railways to showcase local heritage, dialects, stories, and landmarks – including railway history – to reinforce a sense of place and uniqueness;

Promote cultural placemaking

Incorporate art, music, poetry and drama into local engagement and station spaces to foster creativity, inclusivity, and emotional connection to place;

Support inclusive access

Collaborate with those with diverse lived experience, including disabled people and marginalised groups, to improve station accessibility and confidence in rail travel;

• Develop stations into community hubs

Repurpose stations into multifunctional spaces that meet local needs, support sustainable mobility, promote social interactions and deliver social good;

Boost sustainable tourism

Develop rail-based travel guides, digital content, and partnerships with local attractions to promote sustainable tourism and increase rail usage;

Strengthen local economies

Support independent businesses through station retail trails, discount schemes, and local partnership working, helping to create vibrant rail-linked micro-economies:

· Stimulate regeneration through rail

Align community rail projects with wider regeneration goals by collaborating with local authorities and stakeholders to revitalise stations and surrounding areas, contributing expertise on meaningful community engagement.

Recommendations for rail industry partners and Great British Railways:

• Embed community-led station development Partner with the community rail movement and

Partner with the community rail movement and meaningfully involve local communities as a key player in station design and planning through co-production and inclusive engagement, prioritising accessibility and fostering trust and ownership;

Development the concept of stations as community hubs

Work with community rail partnerships and groups and other community partners to transform stations into vibrant public spaces that promote social interaction, wellbeing, cultural expression and sustainable mobility;

Celebrate local identity and heritage

Use and amplify community rail's knowledge and networks to showcase local stories, traditions, and history in station environments, e.g. through art, music and drama, to strengthen community pride and sense of place;

· Use rail to stimulate local economies

Partner with and empower community rail to spearhead projects to develop local enterprise and community-led regeneration, e.g. supporting independent businesses and creatively reusing unused rail assets:

• Promote sustainable tourism

Support and enable community rail and work with other partners to promote rail-based travel experiences, including the use of digital tools and campaigns;

• Align with broader regeneration goals

Draw on community rail's voice and experience to ensure rail-linked placemaking supports wider local strategies, and track its social, environmental and economic impact to inform policy and attract investment.



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Friends of Batley Station





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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:

Rail Delivery Group

National Rail

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 community rail can help them and the communities they serve through practical examples.

For information, see raildeliverygroup.com.



The Old Water Tower, Huddersfield Railway Station, St George's Square, Huddersfield HD1 1JF

E info@communityrail.org.ukW communityrail.org.uk