

# The current context

## What is community engagement?

*“Community engagement is a strategic process to directly involve local populations in all aspects of decision-making, policy development and implementation to strengthen local ownership, capacities and community structures as well as to improve transparency, accountability and optimal resource allocations across diverse settings.”*

The UN

There are many definitions of community engagement, all of which allude in some form to the development of relationships between an organisation – or in this case, a sector – and communities. In the context of this resource, we are framing the term to mean the development of a more strategic and consistent approach by the rail industry to engage community-based stakeholders. This involves building links and ways of working, developing communications, and managing interactions in order to achieve specific outcomes for the industry and communities themselves.



Adapted from **SCDC**

**The National Standards for Community Engagement** are good-practice principles developed by a wide range of practitioners, primarily in Scotland, to improve and guide the process of community engagement, and their elements are relevant to rail project planning and delivery.



# Community engagement and rail

The importance of effective community engagement is reflected in the **Sustainable Rail Blueprint** and is integral to many of its 11 sustainable rail topics.

Two areas that explicitly encourage a more holistic and empowering approach to engagement are: Rail at the Heart of Communities; and Maximising Social Value.

**Rail at the Heart of Communities** – A railway that engages and empowers its communities

*“Rail must engage with communities in a range of meaningful ways. This includes adopting the principles of co-design, placemaking and asset-based community development, as well as working with the community rail movement and learning from the experience of the third sector.”*

*It’s about being responsive to local needs, aspirations and voices, and involving local communities, local authorities and local transport partners in the design and development of rail buildings, services and infrastructure to create a sense of place, pride and self-efficacy.”*

The strategic aim for community engagement within this topic states that rail meets local needs and aspirations, through active community involvement. The industry seeks to encourage collaboration and dialogue across communities, local authorities and regional transport partners to facilitate open, responsive and proactive relationships, allowing rail to identify effective long-term solutions and provide insights around emerging needs.

The hope is that by engaging communities more effectively, rail can be more responsive to local needs and create social value and impact by building confidence and connections with local communities. Community rail is cited as a tool to help enable these connections, with a more consistent, empowering approach sought to deliver greater value, embed partnerships with communities and local leaders, and strengthen modal integration and rail’s place in communities.



## Community engagement and rail

**Maximising Social Value** – A railway that’s committed to the creation and maximisation of social value

The blueprint states that as an industry, rail must continue to understand the needs of local communities through credible insight and research. It suggests that rail should continue to collaborate across the economy and with the communities it serves on innovative programmes that stimulate and improve economic development, social mobility, regeneration, and sustainable growth.

Community rail is again well-placed to collaborate in this area, with demonstrable social value delivered on projects – working with rail partners – to make rail more inclusive and accessible, reducing inequality and social exclusion.

A further strategic aim is to create a vision for the role of rail in society that is shared by the entire industry. The blueprint states that using this vision to position and focus developments and service improvements will raise public awareness of the social value rail creates, and support more meaningful engagement with local communities to maximise this. Through sharing best practice – such as via this resource - and developing collaborative solutions, the full value of rail to society can be explored, understood and communicated.



## Community engagement and rail

### A community-centric railway

The Sustainable Rail Blueprint states that by 2035, ‘a community focused and responsive approach will be embedded across rail.’ This complements the vision outlined in the Government’s Railways Bill of a railway – directed by GBR as a new ‘guiding mind’ – that is more responsive to the needs of local areas and set up to ensure the industry delivers for local users and communities.

Responsiveness to local needs comes from having the culture, support, and mechanisms in place for working with communities and being able to facilitate new and evolving forms of local engagement with rail. It requires attitudes and processes that are people and community-minded, for community representatives to be regarded as partners, and for the industry to always have the door open to new ideas and opportunities emerging at regional and local level.

If GBR seeks to deliver for passengers, it needs to be open, collaborative and responsive, to ensure it’s working with local communities and leaders. This isn’t just about putting different processes in place, or even just devolution of decision-making, but a cultural shift, towards being more person-centred and socially minded. By person-centred, we mean thinking holistically about peoples’ range of needs beyond their role solely as rail users.

Community rail, and its strong, well-established network for involving communities with 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.



## Community engagement and rail

### What is community rail?

Community rail is a grassroots movement made up of community-based and led groups, organisations and initiatives, working closely with the rail industry and local partners. It currently (as at the start of 2026) includes 76 community rail partnerships and 1,300 volunteer groups across England, Scotland and Wales.

Community Rail Network, the author of this report, is community rail's umbrella body, working to support, champion and represent community rail. It supports the movement in connecting people and their railways, contributing to inclusive, empowered, sustainable and healthy communities, and is the lead delivery partner in the Department for Transport's Community Rail Development Strategy.

While independent of the rail industry, community rail is supported by a host of industry partners via joint-working, collaboration and funding, including train operating companies, Network Rail, and many other organisations involved in rail's operations and supply chain.

Community rail is uniquely placed to engage, connect and benefit communities using rail, drawing on local insights to shape a rail network that is community-orientated, responsive to local needs, and derives maximum social, economic and environmental value from local railways and stations.

Policy should champion collaborative, community-minded approaches – welcoming local voices, ideas, and innovation. If the rail industry aims to truly deliver for passengers and people, it must work hand-in-hand with communities.

Community rail, and its strong, well-established network for engaging communities and underrepresented voices, can support and facilitate this step change, offering a direct link between the rail industry and the communities it serves.

To find out more, including a map showing the locations of community rail partnerships and station groups, go to [communityrail.org.uk](https://communityrail.org.uk)

