

# The importance and benefits of community engagement

As part of the research underpinning this resource, we asked members of RSSB's Social Sustainability Working Group (SSWG) why they thought community engagement was important, and what the benefits of effective engagement were.

The findings are outlined here.

## Why is community engagement important, and what are the benefits?

### It helps to inform strategy and ensure projects reflect community wants/needs

- Stakeholder and community engagement gives critical knowledge and perspective as to what is needed and how rail industry organisations can help
- Better linked-up conversations equal better community outcomes – 'businesses are built on communities'
- Engagement should be what informs your community strategy. It can secure buy-in and support for projects and their legacies
- It identifies needs and can support project design
- Effective engagement can identify partnership and collaboration opportunities, it allows the industry to understand local communities

### It helps to educate people about the rail industry and assist workforce development

- Engagement can connect and showcase rail to education providers
- Engagement can help to create a future workforce for the industry, e.g. via STEM activities
- Educational outreach and engagement can introduce young people to rail, raising their aspirations and offering a potential career pathway
- It can support and enhance the wellbeing and job satisfaction of employees

### It can raise awareness and positivity around rail

- It can help to create a positive perception of the railway, overcoming often negative coverage generally
- Promotes increased awareness of the rail industry, and offers an opportunity to give back to/work with communities
- Helps improve perception of the industry and community relations during any disruptive works

### It is integral to driving and maximising social value and impact

- It promotes positive values – doing the right thing. It also drives social value
- It's the 'right thing to do', and it helps to understand challenges in the communities we serve, and the tangible differences and impact we can make



## The importance and benefits of community engagement

### Benefits of effective community engagement for rail

#### Workforce development

- Builds talent pipeline
- Provides STEM activities

#### Industry perception

- Promotes positive values
- Drives social value

#### Community relations

- Builds trust
- Understands needs

#### Educational & outreach

- Engages young people
- Raises aspirations

#### Project support

- Secures buy-in
- Informs strategy



Enhanced reputation for rail industry



Can assist with evidence/bidding for tenders/contracts



Makes business sense - can increase station/rail use



Can position rail environments, e.g. stations, as safe community spaces, reducing crime and ASB, increasing pride and local cohesion



Helps to address societal inequality/promote social mobility



## The importance and benefits of community engagement

### The community engagement spectrum

As part of the research, we asked SSWG members where they thought their organisation currently sat on **IAP2's Spectrum of Public Participation**. The responses varied from consultation to engagement and, in some cases, collaboration. Many said the level of participation varied from project to project, region to region, and between different sectors of the industry. Members also said it was dependent on the type of activity as to what level of engagement was appropriate and/or required.

**IAP2's Spectrum** is designed to assist with the selection of the level of participation that defines the public's role in any public participation process. It is used internationally and is found in public participation plans around the world.

		INCREASING IMPACT ON THE DECISION 				
		INFORM	CONSULT	INVOLVE	COLLABORATIVE	EMPOWER
PUBLIC PARTICIPATION GOAL		To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions.	To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions.	To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered.	To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.	To place final decision making in the hands of the public.
	PROMISE TO THE PUBLIC	We will keep you informed.	We will keep you informed, listen to and acknowledge concerns and aspirations, and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will work with you to ensure that your concerns and aspirations are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will look to you for advice and innovation in formulating solutions and incorporate your advice and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible.	We will implement what you decide.



## The importance and benefits of community engagement

### Moving towards greater community engagement and empowerment

There is an acknowledgment that some rail industry projects – or certainly technical elements within them – would not benefit from a collaborative or co-design/co-production approach, and such principles may not be appropriate and conducive to maximising impact. However, there is also recognition that if rail is to become generally more responsive to local needs, it requires a culture shift to support and empower locally-driven initiatives, as opposed to top-down concepts and approaches to working with local communities.

This is demonstrated in government policy via the Railways Bill and GBR, which commits to making the railway more responsive to local objectives and the communities it serves. It is also reflected by the addition of place-based business cases in the Treasury's **Green Book**, which has recently seen an increased focus on social value in determining public value for money. Social value is also reinforced by the introduction of **PPN 002**, the UK Procurement Policy Note that stipulates a new Social Value Model as mandatory for central government procurements, aligning with the **Procurement Act 2023** and the new **National Procurement Policy Statement (NPPS)**.

Aligning with rail-specific strategy, such as Network Rail's **Greener Railway Strategy**, which makes consideration of social value mandatory in public procurement and allows for tenders to be awarded based on community outcomes, the above are all welcome changes in the process of embedding social value as a key component of transport-related business cases.

To move towards a more collaborative and empowering approach, our findings from this research, and experience from within community rail, would advocate the following principles:

**Recognise that community engagement and strong local relationships is a vital prerequisite to understanding and responding to local needs** – encourage everyone across the industry, at all levels and in all roles, to be people and community-minded, for communities 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 levels.

**Include specific ambitions for engaging communities** – although community involvement with rail has advanced, it is frequently still seen as a 'nice to have,' and we remain a long way from buy-in permeating all corners of the industry.

**Offer an open door to community approaches and refined ways of responding to and progressing projects** – it is crucial for the railway to be open when local groups, authorities, businesses and service providers approach it with ideas, proposals and to involve rail in broader local initiatives. There is also a need for appropriate mechanisms to feed in (and upwards) local ideas, insights and opportunities to other parts of rail operations, and at a more senior level.

**Embrace local partnership working** – The railways have often in the past been viewed as difficult to penetrate and engage with, by community groups and local authorities. Setting out a firm commitment to an open door/open ears policy, with standards and mechanisms for local collaboration would represent a positive step forward.

**Put communities at the forefront** – not only engaging with communities, but taking a participatory and empowering approach, as rail's standard *modus operandi*, would represent an innovative shift in mindset. Important groundwork for this has been laid with the industry's work with community rail, but further progress is needed to embrace an empowering, community-orientated mindset across different areas of operations.

