

Proactive community engagement



PROMOTING GOOD PRACTICE IN COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT WITH RAIL | DEVELOPED BY



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One theme that emerged very strongly from the research was the need for the rail industry to be more proactive in the way it engages communities.

The general feeling was that direct engagement with communities is not done consistently enough, with tensions and blockers remaining in place.

There was also a consensus that community engagement needs to be built into project plans and business cases from the outset and not only done reactively when problems or issues arise.

Desired and suggested elements of best practice included:

Shift from reactive to proactive engagement

- Engagement should be built into project plans and business cases from the start, not just when issues arise.
- Move away from waiting for problems to occur and instead actively seek community input early on.

Tailored, localised strategies

- Avoid assumptions about community needs, even within the same geographical area.
- Use a ‘nothing about us without us’ approach to ensure communities are involved in decisions that affect them.
- Recognise that different communities have different priorities (e.g. jobs vs. local amenities).

Direct, on-the-ground engagement

- Conduct community needs analysis early and validate it with local stakeholders.
- Physically visit project areas to understand local dynamics and build relationships.
- Use hyper-local engagement methods like community centre meetings and site visits with local leaders.

Strengthen relationships with community rail and VCSEs

- Community rail can be used as a key framework for connecting with communities.
- The rail industry should work more closely with community rail partnerships, charities, businesses, and other grassroots groups. You must ensure that engagement goes beyond local authority level and taps directly into communities themselves.
- Better links with Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) groups are essential for understanding and responding to local challenges.



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Improve visibility and communication

- Be visible and present in communities.
- Use tools like apps to share updates and good news, helping to counteract disruption and give communities a voice.

Build long-term relationships

- Leverage local staff knowledge and existing relationships around stations and other rail-based assets.
- Recognise that embedded relationships heighten impact and ensure project legacy.

Develop a community insights directory

- Create a directory of key local contacts to facilitate better engagement and understanding of ‘who’s who’ in each area.

Focus on social value

- Align engagement with place-based social value strategies.
- Bring together multiple stakeholders to map out needs and opportunities, adding value through rail involvement.

“Never assume what communities want. Strategies need to be flexible to cater for different needs.”

“Find ways to bridge the gap between communities and the projects themselves. You are that link, and it is vital to keep people engaged.”

“We don’t want to go in and do stuff ‘for communities,’ we want to understand what the community needs and then they access and use the resources and skills that we have.”

“Community engagement cannot be a one-size fits all approach. The most fruitful community projects come from using local knowledge.”

Why is proactive community engagement important to the rail industry?

Proactive community engagement brings major benefits to the rail industry by helping it understand local needs and priorities. By working closely with community groups and local organisations, the industry can gain insights to develop more responsive services, build stronger relationships, and plan more effectively for the long term.

The community rail movement plays a key role in this process. Embedded in local areas but working closely with the rail sector, it acts as a bridge between the industry and the people it serves. Through outreach and shared planning, it ensures that local voices and lived experiences help shape industry strategies.

For the rail industry, the task is to listen, support, and create clear ways for community input to influence real decisions. When community organisations collaborate with train operators, Network Rail, and other industry partners, the result is services and projects that better reflect genuine local priorities.

Engaging directly with communities also opens up new ideas, feedback, and opportunities. By working with a broad network of local partnerships and groups, the rail industry stays focused on its core purpose, serving people and supporting better places. Strengthening this proactive engagement will help create a more effective, inclusive and trusted rail network for everyone.



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Case Study:

South West Wales Connected Community Rail Partnership – ‘Shared Vision’ meetings

Established in 2020 by Transport for Wales and hosted by 4theRegion, the **South West Wales Connected Community Rail Partnership** (CRP) works to drive positive change through collaborative placemaking. The CRP created a programme of ‘shared visioning’ meetings that brought together local stakeholders to co-develop ideas and action plans for railway stations and their surrounding communities, aligning with the Well Being of Future Generations Act.

Using an Asset Based Community Development approach, the partnership held sessions near stations to help residents identify local priorities and take ownership of improvements. Participants valued the chance to connect and share aspirations, showing a strong appetite to lead community projects.

These meetings also supported TfW’s goals of promoting rail as a sustainable and accessible travel option, encouraging greater use by both locals and visitors and strengthening community and local business engagement with the rail network.

The sessions generated practical initiatives focused on improving station environments, strengthening transport links, and developing joint campaigns. At Haverfordwest Station, for example, this has led to better accessibility, clearer wayfinding, new community uses for disused rail spaces, and increased greening of the station.

By working closely with rail industry partners, the CRP helps turn community ideas into actionable projects, acting as the vital link between local enthusiasm and meaningful, grassroots led regeneration across South West Wales.



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Methods of proactive engagement:

To maximise the benefits of proactive engagement, draw on the knowledge and input of local groups and organisations and their beneficiaries to understand and address local needs and barriers. Use a range of methods – going beyond just informing and/or consulting – and as much as possible empower local agents to lead engagement, including interactive workshops, participatory mapping, creative projects, youth/citizen-led campaigns, community-led audits, meetings, and events. Enable people to come together, deliberate and feed in views, creating momentum and positivity about change.

Possible methods



Meaningful proactive engagement, based on the principles and methods cited above, can help to:

- Build trust and relationships;
- Maximise knowledge via collective experiences, expertise, and innovative solutions;
- Foster inclusion and empowerment;
- Lead to better outcomes and impact;
- Enhance accountability and transparency;
- Address issues early;
- Develop community cohesion and resilience.

Useful resources: E.g. [Inclusive community engagement](#), [Community mapping toolkit](#), [Engaging with your community in a meaningful way](#) etc.