

Greater Manchester Transport Strategy 2050 and Delivery Plan Consultation – evidence from Community Rail Network – March 2026

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 77 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.

Across Greater Manchester and neighbouring areas, six CRPs and more than 40 station groups are already contributing to many of the ambitions set out in the draft strategy. These initiatives support wider transport goals by improving access to stations, encouraging sustainable travel behaviours, strengthening community connections to local transport networks, and ensuring the railway reflects the needs of the communities it serves.

Find out more about our work, and our members, at www.communityrail.org.uk

‘Right Mix’ transport target:

We are supportive of the Greater Manchester Transport Strategy’s (GMTS) vision of a transport system that ensures a greener, more equal future for all. Greater integration between sustainable transport modes can produce a myriad of benefits for society and individuals, such as reducing transport-related exclusion and transport poverty, enabling modal shift and decarbonisation, improving air quality and public health, and widening access to opportunity, particularly benefitting young people, disabled people, low-income and marginalised groups.

However, community rail’s experience is that accessing and using rail and other forms of public transport has become another world for many if not most people. Many young people we work with have never been on a train before, many older people have not travelled on one for years, and many low-income and marginalised groups perceive that rail is ‘for rich people,’ prohibitively expensive, or otherwise out of reach. There is generally a need to build awareness, skills and confidence to break down perceived barriers to rail and public transport use, and the engagement typically delivered within community rail is an evidenced (as well as low-cost and high-value) way to do this.

In addition, there are a range of practical barriers that need to be addressed if transport systems are to feel ‘joined-up’ to users. These are diverse and multi-faceted, but our experience suggests that in order to be considered as a genuine alternative to private car use, travel options need to be: reliable; affordable; safe and enjoyable; accessible; and offer easy and convenient interchange between modes.

We believe a step-change is needed across the transport field to integrate modes with the express intention of giving priority to sustainable and inclusive travel (using public transport, active travel, and community and shared mobility) and reducing private car dependency. We therefore welcome the commitment by Greater Manchester aiming for 50 per cent of all journeys across the region to be made by public transport or active travel by 2040, and feel this is an appropriate and realistic target to aspire to.

The strategy acknowledges that to achieve this aim, it is crucial to recognise and continually appraise the diverse experiences and needs of different groups using Greater Manchester's transport network. Our experience in community rail tells us that one of the reasons transport networks can be fragmented is that decisions are made for communities, not with them. In rail, for example, the needs and experiences of existing rail passengers are given much attention (rightly) but there is much less data, insight and consideration to the needs of broader communities, and how to break down barriers for those who don't or would struggle to use rail at present, often related to poor integration. As rail is integrated into the Bee Network, we recommend that Transport for Greater Manchester (TfGM) formalises the role of community rail partnerships and station groups as local engagement and delivery partners, supporting passenger insight, behaviour change, and community engagement around stations and services. We would be pleased to discuss with TfGM how this could be done in a way to maximise community rail's impact and alignment with Greater Manchester's strategic goals.

Broadly speaking, a key way to improve transport decision-making is to include communities as meaningful partners in creating positive and inclusive change. Local transport solutions are often designed without the involvement of the communities they seek to benefit, via modal silos instead of place-based, holistic approaches with people at the forefront. We advocate involving communities in delivering change, taking an engaging, empowering approach that draws on local knowledge and insights to improve modal integration, inclusion and accessibility, and sustainable and healthy mobility, supporting structural and behavioural change simultaneously. Community rail initiatives can play a unique role in delivering the behavioural shift required to achieve the Right Mix target by engaging communities directly, building travel confidence, and supporting people to try sustainable travel options for the first time. Such community-led activity simultaneously brings people together, builds local efficacy, cohesion and confidence, and creates social value. We would be happy to help discuss how this work can be further developed in the Greater Manchester region.

Network ambitions:

The draft GMTS sets long term goals around reliability, integration, affordability, inclusion, health, environment, safety and resilience. We agree that each ambition is important and set out below how they complement elements within the four key pillars of the Department for Transport's (DfT) [Community Rail Development Strategy](#), which is embedded across our network and the work plans of all CRPs.

1) DfT pillar - Providing a voice for communities (GMTS priorities - reliable, integrated, inclusive decisions).

CRPs and station friends' groups work to gather insights and co-design local solutions with operators and local transport authorities. This complements the GMTS and the 2050 vision for the future of rail in Greater Manchester (On the Right Track for Growth), which aims to make stations catalysts for community wellbeing, regeneration and accessibility, i.e. putting community voice into station planning and delivery. Within this vision, such engagement can inform local service patterns, 'first /last mile' priorities, and Bee Network standards for stations and customer information. For example, CRPs and groups could support local audits of

first/last mile access to stations, working with communities to identify barriers and solutions, and feeding in existing local knowledge that they hold.

2) DfT pillar - Promoting sustainable, healthy and accessible travel (GMTS priorities - right transport mix and 2038 net zero target).

Community rail projects routinely support the combined use of active travel, buses and shared mobility alongside rail, e.g. through improving walking/cycling links to stations, local travel guides, and 'try the train' initiatives, breaking down perceptual and practical barriers to rail use and sustainable first/last mile journeys. The GMTS 2040/2050 continuum targets a 50:50 'Right Mix' with much greater use of public transport and sustainable modes, and community rail can help to operationalise this at a neighbourhood level, dovetailing with Bee Network integration. Greater Manchester's decarbonisation trajectory to 2038 requires behaviour change, and community rail has proven to be effective at enabling modal shift, particularly by building travel confidence and improving perceived accessibility of the network. Lines with community rail partnerships have consistently performed better in terms of patronage growth (and recovery post-pandemic) than lines without, and a growing range of projects are producing excellent results in attitudinal and behavioural change, while producing co-benefits. See our reports on the '[value of community rail](#)' and '[community rail: encouraging and enabling modal shift](#)' for examples of this.

3) DfT pillar - Bringing communities together and supporting diversity and inclusion (GMTS priorities - healthy, safe, inclusive).

GMTS seeks a network that is inclusive, safe and welcoming. Community rail delivers targeted work with young people, older people and marginalised groups, greatly increasing travel confidence and delivering significant social value. Embedding inclusive engagement into station environments also reduces anti-social behaviour through community presence, integrates local culture, and nurtures pride in place, all elements that are supportive of GMTS' desired outcomes on safety, health and equality. Our recent report '[community rail: placemaking and local identity](#)' contains various examples of this type of work.

4) DfT pillar - Supporting social and economic development (GMTS priorities - growth and regeneration).

GMTS 2050 and TfGM's rail vision emphasise rail led growth, via new and upgraded stations, improved accessibility, and housing and major regeneration developments. The GM Station Alliance model already aligns transport and land use, enabling development around stations, and community rail can again play a strong and growing role in this, via reinvigorating the rail estate, e.g. station buildings and land, for social good, putting stations at the heart of community life, while supporting destination marketing for local businesses and leisure.

Individual network policies:

The individual policies underpinning the vision of the GMTS are clear in how they will translate ambitions into action. We do not offer comment in detail but would again highlight how some of the specific policies reflect ongoing projects and activities within community rail, where there is scope for developing reach, impact and strategic alignment. For example:

Integrated – NP4 – Journey planning and information

This policy seeks to encourage people to choose more sustainable modes for their journeys by offering more convenient multi-modal travel options. This is reflected in the work of South East Lancashire CRP, which has piloted and promoted multiple successful projects linking rail

stations and outdoor parks and attractions by bus, e.g. Manchester/Walkden Station/Bridgewater Gardens (see page 14 of our '[value of community rail](#)' report).

Inclusive and affordable – NP6 – An inclusive and accessible network

This policy seeks to ensure that transport infrastructure and information is accessible and inclusive to all and that everyone feels able to use the network. This is a key part of community rail activity, with the movement increasingly supporting and enabling accessible and inclusive journeys and stations, breaking down barriers for those who might otherwise be excluded or marginalised from rail. One example is the work by Community Rail Lancashire, which has been involved in pioneering work to open up rail travel to people with autism, including working with Northern's Accessibility Team to develop immersive resources for Blackburn and Manchester Victoria stations (see page nine of our '[community rail and inclusive, accessible travel](#)' report).

Healthy – NP10 – Health

This policy seeks to develop interventions that improve the physical and mental health of Greater Manchester's residents. Such improvements can be found in the wide array of activities undertaken by station friends' groups, of which there are nearly 350 across the Northern network, including many in and around Greater Manchester. One notable example is the group at Hindley Station, which nurtures green spaces at the station to support the health of local people, e.g. memorial garden, Jubilee Garden, food-growing allotment, alongside working with a host of local charities and good causes supporting community wellbeing.

Well-maintained and resilient – NP16 – Maintenance and asset management

This policy seeks to improve the condition and resilience of the local transport network and maximise use of the assets within it. This complements another vital area of community rail activity, which seeks to make the best possible use, for community and social good, of the rail estate. Projects have seen many neglected buildings and areas of land transformed for community use, including those at Guide Bridge Station, where the friends' group have turned a disused piece of land into a memorial garden, and are busy converting an empty station building into a museum for the Woodhead Line.

Community rail partnerships can play an important role in activating transport hubs, particularly smaller or local stations, ensuring they function as welcoming community hubs and gateways as well as effective interchanges. The care that such groups have for local stations also supports the aims of the 2050 vision for rail across Greater Manchester, which talks of stations being celebrated as part of everyday life and used as catalysts for placemaking and bringing back civic pride. Activities reflecting these aims, e.g. art projects to celebrate local heritage/culture/pride, can be seen across Greater Manchester, including the new artwork and heritage displays at Altrincham Station, supported by the Mid-Cheshire CRP, and elsewhere at stations such as Handforth and Glossop.

Recommendations

Community Rail Network encourages TfGM to recognise the strong and unique role community rail can play in delivering the ambitions of the Greater Manchester Transport Strategy 2050. We recommend that TfGM:

- Recognises community rail partnerships and groups as valuable delivery partners in supporting the integration of rail within the Bee Network, and Community Rail Network's role as its umbrella body;
- Works with community rail partnerships and groups to support behaviour change programmes that encourage greater use of public transport;

- Involves community rail partnerships and groups in initiatives to improve station accessibility, first and last mile connections, and local station environments;
- Draws on the community insight provided by community rail partnerships and groups to better understand the needs of underrepresented groups and communities as a whole at hyper-local level.

By collaborating with community rail partnerships and station groups, TfGM can strengthen the connection between communities and the railway, helping ensure the transport network supports inclusive, sustainable and thriving neighbourhoods across the city region. Community Rail Network looks forward to discussing this further with TfGM to maximise the contribution that community rail makes.

Summary:

We welcome GMTS' ambition to create reliable, integrated, healthy, green and inclusive mobility by 2050, with rail as a backbone of the Bee Network. By its nature as a grassroots movement, community rail puts communities at the centre of rail planning and use, converting policy into lived experience: more confident travellers, more welcoming and accessible stations, stronger local economies, and measurable social value. With the Bee Network rail phases now mapped out and devolution strengthening local levers, there is an opportunity to use community rail as a core partner in planning and delivery, helping Greater Manchester reach its right mix targets, its 2038 carbon goal, and its vision of world class connections that unlock opportunity for all.

Greater Manchester's 'trailblazer' devolution deal and emerging rail reform agenda give the city region greater scope to shape its local railways and stations, opening the door for local CRPs to contribute to effective decision making and delivery, alongside industry and local government/authority partners. We are keen to feed in insights from community rail to help the GMTS become a reality, creating a truly inclusive transport network that serves Greater Manchester's communities well, both now and for generations to come.

To discuss any aspect of this response further, please contact **Rob Lawson** at rob@communityrail.org.uk.