

Community rail consultation

This letter represents the submission from Cheshire West and Chester Council officers to the Department for Transport (DfT) consultation on Community Rail. Although the response is broken down in to key headings, the comments overlap across these. For guidance, the relating consultation question numbers are shown against each paragraph/section.

Wider strategic positioning of community rail (all questions)

This consultation exercise is based upon reviewing the Government's 2007 Community Rail Development Strategy (CRDS). This is an important opportunity for the Government to consider developing an overarching strategy embracing each of the four key themes of this consultation.

- connecting people to places and communities
- supporting communities
- diversity and inclusion
- supporting local and regional economies

Overarching strategy: (all questions)

The overarching strategy would provide a framework to focus on the objectives of a multi modal and cross sector passenger transport approach, that more inclusively and collaboratively provides end to end journey access for all (including addressing mobility and diversity) people to places and opportunities, with the core aims of improving quality of life, sustainable regional and local economic growth and environmental sustainability (reflecting the themes of this consultation).

Cheshire West and Chester Council are at a preliminary stage of assessing the scope for a multi discipline regional stakeholder network to develop this concept, based upon fresh and strategic joint working with major employers, passenger transport providers and the University of Chester. This work will:

- bring forward the needs or benefits sought by people/the business and health sectors

- demonstrate how these can be amalgamated towards creating a critical mass of demand
- assess the range of transport solutions and identifying those who could provide those end to end solutions.

In summary, assessment of non-transport driven strategic (economic, social and environmental) priorities, then considering options for bespoke passenger transport solutions.

The initial strategic, macro level development plan led by Cheshire West and Chester Council, is essential to nurture this new approach, bringing together opportunities for mutual help between communities (also within communities, embracing their diverse and under-represented sectors), health sector, tourism, business sector and passenger transport providers. This work seeks to support existing local and regional projections for job creation and economic growth.

Rail sub strategy: (all questions)

The future CRDS would be based on the role of cross sector stakeholders to lead on the role of rail within the overarching strategy, in the context of rail solutions evolving in unison with other transport solutions. The main aim is on the role of rail, including community rail, to accelerate economic growth and connecting people with places and opportunities.

Road based public transport sub strategy

The other supporting sub strategy would be based on the role of mainstream bus services (local, inter urban and express), community transport (operators who know people within their community), non-fixed route bus services and shared taxi services. This sub-strategy would include work to demonstrate the direct full value of public, health and private sector benefits that could be achieved by prioritised expansion of these services, and measures to overcome actual and perceived barriers of public transport. This would include the wider (economic, social and environmental) benefits of implementing measures to reduce public transport congestion and improving service punctuality.

Accelerating support for local and regional economic growth by community rail

(Questions 2, 6, 8)

There are major opportunities for train operating companies (TOC) to further strengthen local and regional economies, through making more use of the extensive local knowledge and contacts of community rail partnerships (CRP), rail user groups, local authorities and other community groups. When combined with those of TOCs and the wider rail industry, a more comprehensive basis is achieved to take forward initiatives. TOCs could achieve this through contractual arrangements for the funding for one or more staff, employed by these community facing organisations or social enterprise, to have a presence and regular contact within communities and businesses.

Questions (5, 11)

This approach can also be used to obtain feedback on sensitivities to influence behaviour change at strategic or operational levels. For example, assessing factors such as price or willingness to share transport on measures to improve access to (and within) their rail station and services with the aim of reducing demand for full day station car parking accommodation.

Questions (2, 6, 7, 9, 11)

TOCs should be required to ensure that the procurement of supplies and services create more opportunities for small and medium sized businesses and social enterprise located across their network - this includes working with relevant stakeholders to raise awareness of these opportunities. Examples could include:

- on train (or at stations)
- catering facilities
- station cleaning and ticket sales (including web based).

Questions (2, 6, 7, 9, 11)

Station buildings (and un-used land) provide opportunities for small businesses. Helsby station is an example of where small businesses are located at the station. However, more could be done to raise awareness and promote these opportunities including main stations such as Chester. The process and cost can also be prohibitive.

Questions (1b, 6, 8, 11)

Designation of community rail lines creates opportunities for alternative approaches to the management and marketing of these lines in addition to creating bespoke local ticketing offers and operating protocols. These are important opportunities to make rail travel more attractive for accessing employment, training and education, in addition to encouraging 'inward' rail travel for the tourism and recreation markets. There needs to be more commitment for those TOCs with designated lines, to lead on taking forward these opportunities through having designated line status, with a focus on delivering sustainable community and economic benefits.

Question (1b)

Future consideration of designation should include these benefits being based upon actual passenger flows, and not necessarily restricted to a particular line or service - for example passenger flows across Chester.

Strengthening community participation in rail development

Questions (2, 5, 11)

The Government's objectives for the rail industry (paragraph two of the consultation document) include enabling communities to have a stake in the future of its railway to make sure it reflects their needs and aspirations. Care is needed to ensure that communities understand the breadth of network constraints (and funding impacts) of their rail aspirations, yet strengthens how communities can have a greater role in providing measurable supporting evidence for their aspirations.

Questions (1a, 2, 11)

These needs should be complemented by ensuring that community (and business sector) evidenced based priorities are correctly represented within rail strategic rail planning forums. Taking this forward could include (funded) support from bodies such as Transport Focus or local authorities.

Question (11)

Building community cohesion through bringing together disparate groups, is a further example of what can be achieved by strengthening the local presence (and therefore knowing key contacts, people and under-represented groups) of an 'advocate' of the local rail line/stations. This could include enabling group travel incentives (for schools and others) and work with community transport providers to broaden peoples' travel horizons including travel for those accompanying such groups.

Questions (4a, 4b)

The work of volunteers significantly adds to the overall experience of rail users, and provides widespread benefits to the volunteers. Stations along the North Cheshire and Mid Cheshire lines (and between Ellesmere Port and Hooton on the Wirral line) have been significantly enhanced by the art work and ground work by volunteers. Petty Pool College (located near Northwich, helping young adults with additional needs) students do voluntary work at stations on the Mid Cheshire line, in conjunction with the Mid Cheshire CRP. In 2016, staff from the Cheshire West and Chester Council Planning and Strategic Transport Service volunteered for one day, doing weeding at Ellesmere Port railway station.

Questions (4a, 4b)

Showing recognition to volunteers is important. Cheshire West and Chester Council supports the annual 'Cheshire Best Kept Stations' awards which is one such measure. This popular event is attended by many dignitaries, with award winners receiving a plaque which is displayed at their station.

Potential ways of developing the roles of community rail

Questions (2, 8, 11)

Cheshire West and Chester Council, in conjunction with Transport Focus, have provided the Department for Transport with a draft proposal for future stakeholder engagement for the forthcoming Wales and Borders rail franchise. The draft proposal includes a potential role for representation from CRPs or rail user groups in a strategic planning forum. This is currently being considered by a working group of the Welsh Government Cross Border

Forum, which will report its findings to the Department for Transport and Welsh Government.

Questions (4a, 4b, 5, 6)

A further dimension to this approach could be to make available travel training and mentoring to help overcome the intimidation of rail travel that can be a barrier to many people. Travel training can also help identify some specific barriers (and solutions) for people with a hidden disability. Again, (with funding), this could build upon broadening the valuable role of community transport operators to help a wider sector of their communities. The Children and Families Service of Cheshire West and Chester Council provide travel training for children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities. This could be broadened to include more people, and for other specialist organisations (e.g. community transport or CRP) to be trained to provide this training.

Question (9)

These measures represent potential opportunities to broaden income streams for the community rail sector. In addition to cost recovery, the income can enhance the wider scope of community facing work of these valuable organisations.

Question (9)

Community rail organisations may benefit from wider business planning support, in addition to dialogue with their train operating companies and local authority business support teams.

Governance of community rail

Question (12)

Whilst CRPs have a commendable record of achievements including work of volunteers to improve stations, engagement with schools and events linked to rail travel, these can also be achieved without the need of forming a CRP.

Questions (8, 12)

It is most important to have the funding, capacity building and appropriate governance in place to achieve the required outcomes.

Question (12)

Although CRPs will often be the best solution, there should not be a requirement for the specific creation of new CRPs. This should particularly encourage partnerships that focus on economic growth and quality of life improvements, driven by boosting patronage of rail and other public transport services.

Other comments

Questions (1b, 6)

More work is needed to make rail travel an overall less intimidating experience for many people. Although stations have a help point, these need to be made easier to locate, particularly at unstaffed stations. This can potentially avoid anti-social behaviour incidents developing, and be an immediate aid for vulnerable people.

Questions (6, 9)

Where community rail can demonstrate a role in generating additional rail service patronage and revenue, the TOC(s) should be required to reinvest an appropriate proportion of that net financial gain. This is particularly important where third parties have provided financial input to the work of those community rail initiatives.

Further information

If any further information or clarification about this consultation response would be of help, please contact Gerard Rhodes.

- Email: concessionarytravel@cheshirewestandchester.gov.uk
- Telephone: 01244 973879)