

4 minutes by train to the future via the past

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“What a great and inspired way to persuade people to use the train and help improve our city’s environment.” that is the view of Birmingham City Council’s Cabinet Member for Transport & Environment Councillor Waseem Zaffar MBE. Cllr Zaffar was speaking at the unveiling of new artwork at one of Birmingham’s inner-city railway stations.

It’s well over half a century since two communities of Small Heath and Sparkbrook in Birmingham were jointly served by a railway station. Earlier this month the original station name of Small Heath & Sparkbrook was celebrated in a community art installation. First used by the Great Western Railway in 1863 when they opened a station at Golden Hillock Road, the name has returned as part of unique artwork specially designed for the station by local people, funded by community arts funding at West Midlands Railway.

Based on an idea by Birmingham City Councillor Shabrana Hussain, who, along with others from local communities are planning to adopt Small Heath Railway Station, the artwork was installed. The message within the art boards is designed to both celebrate the heritage of the station whilst capturing the eyes of passing motorists to highlight how much quicker it is to use the train to reach Birmingham City Centre.

The Art Deco style was featured to celebrate the year of the station’s opening in 1908 and the designs

produced by a local business at nearby Henley in Arden. Based on Cllr Hussain's wish to highlight the railway station serving Small Heath & Sparkbrook as an efficient alternative to the A45, providing fast public transport rail access to and from Birmingham City Centre taking just 4 minutes.

Cllr Hussain, who suggested the idea for the West Midlands Railway Community Arts Programme said: "The train is so quick, and many people do not realise a railway station here serves both Small Heath & Sparkbrook. I want more people to use the train because it's efficient and much better for our environment, I think telling people it's only 4 minutes by train will make them think and encourage them to use the train"

Cllr Zaffar said: "Local ideas like this brought to life by community volunteers show how much difference can be made to local and wider environments and make a real difference in helping to deliver Birmingham's Transport Plan supporting our clean air and our road to zero carbon objectives."

Small Heath Railway Station is one of eighteen stations between Birmingham Snow Hill and Stratford upon Avon that local communities have adopted. The local volunteers are supported and funded by a volunteer-led Community Station Partnership known as the Friends of the Shakespeare Line www.friendsl.org.uk

Cllr Hussain stepped forward with other members of the local community to involve Small Heath and Sparkbrook in 2020. Consequently, a series of further improvements are planned for the Railway Station. The large exterior artwork and the recent repainting of the station by train operator West Midlands Trains are the first of several improvements that are now progressing due to community engagement at the station and the support by the Friends of the Shakespeare Line and the local rail user group.

A key aim alongside the arts installations and landscaping plans is to attract investment for step-free access at the station to alleviate the struggle for passengers in accessing the platforms via deep stairwells.

Fraser Pithie, a volunteer who leads the Friends of the Shakespeare Line, said: "We are so pleased to see this artwork unveiled and other things starting to happen at the station serving Small Heath & Sparkbrook. It's been a bit of a forgotten place on the railway, and today marks a significant step as two communities within the inner city area of Birmingham are reconnecting with their railway station and working with the rail industry and city council to help meet the environmental challenges of the 21st century. This is community rail activity at its best, and in the urban heart of Britain's second city."

Fay Easton, Head of Stakeholder and Community at West Midlands Railway, said: "It has been a privilege to work with the Friends of the Shakespeare Line and Local Councillors to uplift the station environs with such stunning community artworks. As a Train Operating Company, we are committed to supporting communities in the areas we serve and will continue to work with local stakeholders and schools to celebrate the history and heritage of Small Heath & Sparkbrook."

Photo credit: Friends of the Shakespeare Line