

Community Rail Network to deliver ground-breaking initiative to tackle loneliness

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An innovative, empowering initiative designed to tackle loneliness among young people by engaging them with local railways and wider transport links has been given the green light.

The 'Engaging young people through community rail' initiative is one of 12 projects being supported by the Department for Transport's new **Tackling Loneliness with Transport Fund**. It will be led by **Community Rail Network** with research partner the **University of the West of England**, and involve community rail partnerships and other youth and community partners running three pilot schemes in Bristol and Gloucester, Blackburn with Darwen, and Newcastle and County Durham.

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The ground-breaking work will develop and test a framework for community-based initiatives that bolster transport skills and confidence among 15-to-24-year-olds, increasing access to potentially life-changing

opportunities, and promoting health, wellbeing, cohesion, and sustainable mobility. It will build on the growing work of the community rail movement, which engages communities across Britain with rail to deliver local benefits and support sustainable development.

The project will involve young people from diverse backgrounds, including those commonly facing mobility barriers, seeking to open-up independent mobility and create a sense of connectedness. Rail-based excursions, travel skills and confidence-building, creative activities, and youth-led projects will create feelings of ownership towards rail and transport, raise aspirations, and build social links.

- **Bristol & Gloucester:** [Sevenside](#) and [Gloucestershire](#) community rail partnerships will work with community partners in East Bristol and Gloucester to engage four to five cohorts of young people from low-income areas, through activities and trips to rural/coastal locations;
- **Blackburn with Darwen:** [Community Rail Lancashire](#) will draw on relationships with the local authority, colleges, and local creative practitioners to work with students and other groups, engaging them in creative activities and building social links and travel awareness, responding to the high prevalence of loneliness among young people in this area;
- **Newcastle & County Durham:** Family and youth charity [Catch22](#) will build a pilot into their National Citizen Service programme, building on their work to embolden 16 to 17-year-olds, working with community rail to develop travel confidence.

The Tackling Loneliness with Transport Fund, which will provide nearly £5million to the first 12 projects, was created to explore and develop innovative transport solutions to support groups who are the most at risk of loneliness across England, including people living in rural areas, the elderly, young people, or those with a physical and mental health condition. Research has shown that young people can experience the highest levels of loneliness of any age group, with nearly one in ten stating they feel lonely 'often or always.'

Jools Townsend, chief executive of [Community Rail Network](#), said: "We're thrilled this initiative has received the backing of the Tackling Loneliness with Transport Fund. Experience in community rail, and among youth organisations, suggests that independent, confident access to transport can have a transformative effect on young people's lives, yet it's often lacking.

"We're looking forward to working with a leading academic and coordinating pilots in three locations to develop participatory, empowering approaches to involving young people with rail and sustainable transport. We know this can widen access to opportunity, raise aspirations, and create a sense of connectedness, which is doubly crucial post-pandemic. We hope our findings will be used and shared nationwide, enabling thousands more young people to be involved with transport each year, tackling loneliness, and helping them live their lives to the full."

Dr Miriam Ricci, senior research fellow, Centre for Transport & Society, University of the West of England, said: "Having led successful action research projects in partnership with the community rail sector in the past, I am delighted to be part of this exciting project aimed at improving young people's lives. The three pilots will enable us to produce new evidence on how community rail-based initiatives, co-designed with

young people, youth organisations and community rail partners, can tackle loneliness and social isolation, while at the same time improving young people's confidence and ability to travel sustainably."

Heather Cullimore, partnership manager for the Severnside Community Rail Partnership, said: "The Severnside Community Rail Partnership is delighted to be involved in such a valuable pilot project, supporting young people living in East Bristol in using the public transport network to reach new experiences in rural and coastal locations. Academic research measuring the impact the project has on the overall wellbeing of participants will help shape our future programme of activity."

Hannah McDonnell, co-director of Gloucestershire Community Rail Partnership, added: "This exciting initiative has the potential to make a difference to young people's lives in Gloucestershire and nationally, both during the project and in the longer term through the evidence gained. From previous work we have done we know that significant shifts can take place in young people's lives when connectivity and confidences are increased through travel and transport. We are delighted at the news and looking forward to working with our community and rail partners."

Katie Douglas, Community Rail Lancashire's accessibility & inclusion officer, said: "Supporting young people to be confident rail passengers and build stronger connections to their local area is central to our work at Community Rail Lancashire and we are very pleased that we will be able to expand our work in Blackburn and Darwen. Loneliness and isolation are widespread and can be devastating for both individuals and communities, this project will enable us to have a deeper understanding of the part we can play in preventing loneliness for some of our young people."

Gareth Johnson, contract manager at Catch 22, said: "Catch22 are extremely proud to be working with community rail to deliver such an exciting initiative. The project will allow young people from the North of England who often find transport barriers to accessing education, work, and training to understand a wider scale of opportunities available to them through the rail network."

Minister Baroness Vere of Norbiton, said: "Loneliness affects millions of people across the UK. Transport can help us solve this problem by connecting us to people, places, and experiences. Congratulations to the organisations that secured funding for their proposals. This is a great opportunity to improve future transport schemes and shape the national conversation on loneliness. We will continue to work closely with transport providers and community groups to build an inclusive and accessible transport network."