

Community rail partners continue important work despite challenges of COVID-19

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Despite the continuing challenges of COVID-19, community groups on South Western Railway's network are continuing their work to revitalise stations and support local communities.

The initial lockdown made it impossible for these groups to continue their work, but, as restrictions have slowly eased, work has been able to resume.

At Swaythling station in Hampshire, the Three Rivers Community Rail Partnership (CRP), has transformed two redundant spaces and turned them into areas fit for community use. The work included stripping out joists, laying new floor tiles, adding electric sockets, wall heaters and a sink, as well as uncovering the vintage fireplace.

East Hampshire CRP has re-opened their Free Shop programme at Petersfield station, which allows the local community to collect surplus food from local supermarkets that may have otherwise gone to waste.

Both these groups lease their spaces from South Western Railway on 'peppercorn rent', allowing the groups to focus their funding on improving the stations, and expand their work to other station buildings.

Mark Miller, officer for Three Rivers and East Hants CRPs, said: “We are grateful to SWR for allowing us to take on these spaces without having the pressure of a rent to account for. The station staff and manager have been brilliant throughout.”

Additionally the Lymington to Brockenhurst and Isle of Wight CRPs, have worked with SWR to transfer funding from their ‘Music on the Move’ initiative, to the new “Food on the Move” project, which delivered food to the most vulnerable people in their local area during the difficult period of lockdown.

SWR also continued to keep in touch with station adopters, volunteers who undertake gardening or artwork at stations. This year, SWR had provided more money than ever before into its station adoption fund and encouraged these station adoption groups to apply for funding, especially to replace plants that died during the pandemic.

It was one of the first train operations in the country to introduce rules to allow some adoption activities to restart at stations. This made a particular difference at Lake on the Island, where a unique planter, finally arrived, thanks to the efforts of a local family.

Following, the Isle of Wight’s Broadlea Primary School’s successful planter, designed in the style of the former underground trains that serve Island Line, the group set out to go bigger and better this year, linking a new flower display to the school’s efforts to support the local independent lifeboat service. The specially made Lifeboat planter, was funded by SWR and built using the technical skills of a volunteer from the school.

The perfect plan that had been created by the school for the unveiling, linked in with fundraising activities for the lifeboat operation, as well as water safety training for the children, was unfortunately cancelled due to the COVID-19 lockdown. Although the planter was saved from the school, Emma Milliard, who organised it, and her family had to wait until the easing of rules to deliver it outside the station. The final piece is now in place, including plants donated by family friends.

Emma, whose father, John, made the planter, said: “We had big plans before the lockdown for the children’s Go Orange day and it seemed a shame to not be able to go ahead with those plans. Therefore, to put a smile on everyone’s face we have put the lifeboat planter at the station as planned for everyone to see while out on their daily exercise.

“We are forever grateful to the crew at SSILB and we’re thankful to have them still keeping the bay safe through these uncertain times.”

Elsewhere, Wareham station has been brightened by a collaboration between Purbeck CRP and Wareham in Bloom.

Andy Harrowell, SWR’s Community Rail Manager, said: “It’s been a strange time for everyone, especially for those whose jobs focus on promoting train travel. I can only offer my thanks to the CRP line officers, who have used this time productively to further support their local communities.

“Equally, we appreciate the patience of our station adopters eager to return to their activities at our

stations. We will continue to monitor our rules around this area to support their safety and that of our passengers and staff. We have already provided almost £2,500 to support these groups efforts since April and stand ready to provide more funding to rebuild their beautiful flower displays, at the right time.”

Photo credit: South Western Railway

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