

Rail industry and community groups will work together to restore passenger confidence

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Community Rail groups and the rail industry have agreed they must work closely together to protect rail services following the impact of the pandemic.

This was a key outcome from this winter's Transport for the North Community and Rail User group event attended by 100 delegates from across the North of England.

Brian Barnsley, Deputy Chief Executive for the Community Rail Network, said: "Going back to 1993, Community Rail started primarily because lines were at risk. That's why we started. And it has evolved. We know our communities – and we know how to get them back on the railway. It isn't necessarily huge campaigns. It's talking to people. People lack the confidence."

Delegates were told by Lucja Majewski, the Regional Development Manager of TransPennine Express (TPE), that although leisure travel had picked up over the summer, the impact of the second lockdown meant that TPE saw just 12 to 14 per cent of the passenger numbers on its trains compared to this time last year. Since 2 December there have been signs of recovery.

She said: “We are very keen to talk with community groups, to let them know what we are doing and to engage with them. We want to make sure that they have confidence that we can deliver the services they are looking for and that they can see we have got staff out there cleaning trains. We have invested quite heavily in this across the North. When the time is right, we are looking forward to welcoming people back.”

Event host David Hoggarth, **Strategic Rail** Director at Transport for the North, said: “This is about rebuilding confidence. A lot of the great work the Community Rail groups have done has been about introducing people who haven’t been as familiar or confident with using the network. That work must continue, but there is also a job to do with those people who have lapsed using rail and who just need that confidence regaining.”

Transport Focus Director David Sidebottom said his organisation’s survey work found there was a ‘perception gap to close’ between those who use the railways regularly during the pandemic – and those who have been away from them.

“Looking at our latest research,” he said, “around 88 per cent of those using public transport in the past week felt safe doing so, yet among those who haven’t used it since around March – that figure reduces by half. The science is important, but we have got to make it come to life. It has got to be real.”

Event facilitator, Rail journalist, Tony Miles, said: “The big challenge is, if we are going to keep these lines, then the advocates of community rail lines must start using them.”

Speaking for the Avanti West Coast Partnership, Matthew Worman, Regional Growth Manager, said: “There is also a role for Community Rail in intelligence gathering here as well. We are going into uncharted territory – and there will probably be a bit of a Covid hangover with people being habitually conscious about social distancing – especially with some of the older demographics.”

LNER’s Head of Stakeholder Engagement, Ben Garratt, said: “It has been a very difficult year. We are not running trains for their own sake. We are doing it for the economy. We are doing it for the community. We are doing it to raise revenue to re-invest in rail.

“We think hard about the benefit we bring to our local community through initiatives such as our community investment strategy. We look at things like tackling loneliness, supporting the environment, supporting education – all issues that are important to communities and things that we can work on together.”

Carolyn Watson, Director of Stakeholder and Community Engagement for Northern Trains said: “Community Rail has a strong history in our region and it is vitally important. If you look at some of the work that has been going on like the Dementia friendly line, like the autism line, they recognise some of the real challenges. And some of the work around things like virtual reality that is being done with these groups can move on to a much wider scale.”

She added that, although groups like station adopters have been frustrated over the summer in not being able to get out, some of the things that have been going on have been absolutely amazing – including the way people have turned out to their community using things like Zoom and getting broader engagement.

Network Rail's, Karen Hornby, Head of Customer, Stations and Performance for the North West Route, told delegates: "We should recognise how hard Community Rail groups work. These groups are a massive part of what we do – and we need them. When the time is right, we really need to encourage people back on the railway. It's safe, and it's a great way to travel."

Photo credit: Transport for the North

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