

Transport for the North event heralds “new era” for rail

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Transport for the North’s Community Rail User Stakeholder Event brought the industry together to explore lessons learned from the pandemic.

Transport for the North said the main sense from the event was that there was a “new era” dawning for the industry.

Those who took part also looked at how the industry can better work together in 2022. The event reflected on challenges such as reduced passenger figures, staff shortages and streamlined timetables. It highlighted a shift in living and working patterns, how it has impacted passenger needs and demand, and the ways in which the industry has quickly adapted.

Event host David Hoggarth, Strategic Rail Director at Transport for the North, said: “Getting back on the train following the lockdown in 2021, it was striking to see how much of a step change there had been and the difference in overall atmosphere on the railways. This included everything from a new station platform at Leeds, removal of pacer trains from the network and a cleaner and calmer environment across the networks.

“Despite the challenges of the past few years, we are emerging with a better, more efficient railway that people can enjoy. Alongside investment from the train operating companies and Network Rail, a lot of this is thanks to our partners across the Community Rail Network.”

The event brought together train operating companies Northern and Transpennine Express, alongside key industry organisations like Network Rail, to give an update on activity from over the past year. Community Rail Network members were also given the opportunity to share some of their highlights from the year, which included impactful work with young people on safety and trespassing campaigns.

Peter Cole, principal environmental and sustainability officer at Transport for the North set out the way that rail partners can help the UK achieve its ambitious zero-carbon targets. He said: “Our recently launched Decarbonisation Strategy, the first of its kind for the North, sets out how rail is already one of the least carbon-intensive ways to travel and accounts for less than 3% of transport emissions in the North.

“Therefore, the biggest decarbonisation gains will come from encouraging more people to switch from road to rail. A key priority for Transport for the North this year is working with partners to turn ambitious words into tangible delivery, and as the Community Rail Network are the eyes and ears on the ground across the North, they are integral to helping achieve these goals.”

Jools Townsend, Chief Executive of the Community Rail Network, said: “This event is a chance for us to celebrate the invaluable work that community rail partnerships and station volunteers deliver across the North, engaging local communities, promoting and increasing access to rail travel, and advising our rail partners on local needs. We had a strong focus over the past year on encouraging and enabling more people to use rail as one of the greenest ways to travel and supporting local resilience and recovery from the pandemic.

“If we are to succeed in increasing access to opportunity while shifting as many journeys as we can away from private cars, onto rail, buses, walking and cycling, we need to work with local people and break down barriers. The community rail movement is uniquely placed to do that.”

Attendees agreed that encouraging passengers back onto the railways and attracting new passengers was key.

Speakers from Merseytravel and Transport North East spoke of putting user experience at the heart of the work they do. Meanwhile, Michael Paul, Head of Advice and Information at Disability Rights UK, discussed the importance of breaking down barriers and the “huge opportunities in a more rounded approach to passenger assistance”, encouraging collaborative working across the network.

Summarising the event, David Hoggarth said: “To make sure we grasp the opportunities this new era for the railway presents, we must continue to make the case for investment and better collaborate with partners to create a greener, cleaner and more inclusive railway.

“The Community Rail Network alongside user and station groups are integral to the success of the railways as they help us to better understand local needs and listen to people’s views through genuine engagement, and we look forward to continuing our work together throughout the year to make a

difference in our Northern communities.”