



West Somerset Railway Association

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Thursday 11th June 2015

Association appoints independent Chairman to head Review Panel



At the General Meeting of Sunday 10th May, a resolution was passed to conduct a full review of the West Somerset Railway Association's aims and objectives. Since then, the Trustees have moved quickly to appoint an experienced and independent Chairman for the review, and this appointment was confirmed on Monday 8th June.

The Review Chairman will be Robin Coombes. Robin is a Chartered Architect by profession. After qualifying from the University of Wales, he joined British Rail's Architects Department in 1980 and was later appointed as a project manager for the launch of Network SouthEast, prior to becoming Rail Marketing Manager for Network North at Euston.

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After eight years with British Rail, Robin was invited to be a Board Director of the then recently-privatised National Welsh Bus Company. In 1989, he joined Burgess Partnership Limited (B3Architects) and after completing 25 years took early retirement in 2014, having served the last ten years as Company Chairman. Between 1992 and 2005, Robin was also a founder and company director of ERES, an economic and environmental consultancy working mainly on EU funded technical programmes in Asia and Central Europe. In addition to his corporate governance role, his professional career covers not only the design and delivery of major buildings but also the wider fields of master planning, transport planning and regional development. He has also worked extensively in the heritage sector including a number of projects for the National Museum of Wales. He also has extensive experience of assisting organizations in ADR (Alternative Dispute Resolution) solutions and decisions. Robin was appointed a Magistrate in 1988 and has to date completed 27 years of service. He is not a member of the Association and has no links with any other group based on the Railway, though he is familiar with the heritage railway movement and retains his life-long interest in and passion for all aspects of railway history, technology and operations.

The Review will follow the letter of the resolution passed at the General Meeting to form its terms of reference. The Review Chairman will write to invite representatives from the named organizations to form the Review Panel. The Review will be conducted in the style of a 'parliamentary select committee', whereby everyone who wishes to will be invited to make submissions in writing, and then the panel will conduct a series of interviews with key organizations and individuals based on the written submissions received. The Review will include the named organizations in the resolution - West Somerset Railway Association, WSRA Reform Group, West Somerset Railway Plc and West Somerset Steam Railway Trust.

Representatives will be actively encouraged to question, analyse, challenge and contribute to the final report based on their knowledge and experience and the submissions made. However, they will not be allowed to express or give the views of the organizations they individually represent. The reason for this is that if the panel is to function as a cohesive team and form collective recommendations, it will not be the forum for airing their own organization's opinions and views. All the named organizations will be given full opportunity to present their views and evidence in both written format and interview.

Speaking of his appointment, Robin Coombes said, "I am very pleased to have been charged with this task. I do not underestimate the strength of feeling involved on all sides but am confident that I can lead a review process that will be useful to the Association and the Railway as a whole. I will conduct the Review in a completely independent manner and my aim is to look beyond personalities at the deeper issues underlying the current climate. The Review will be thorough and I expect the Review Panel to be formed and begin work within the next two weeks."

Association Chairman Peter Chidzey commented, "The Trustees are pleased to have secured a person of Robin Coombes' experience and calibre to undertake this Review and we look forward to working proactively with him and others involved in the process."

A timeframe will initially be set in which written submissions will be invited and interviews will begin shortly following the closure date for those written submissions. Full details of how written submissions can be made will be announced shortly and the Review Chairman will be writing to the organizations named in the resolution to invite them to participate. It is envisaged that the first meeting will take place within the next fourteen days and updates on the work of the group will be given at regular intervals.