

WEST SOMERSET RAILWAY
PARTNERSHIP DEVELOPMENT GROUP (PDG)

Minutes of a meeting of the PDG held on-line via Zoom software
from 10.00 on Wednesday 8 December 2021

Present: Steve Williams, West Somerset Railway Plc (Chair)
Mike Thompson, West Somerset Railway Heritage Trust
Mike Sherwood, West Somerset Railway Association
Cllr David Hall, Somerset County Council
John Parsons, Station Masters Representative
Martin Adfield, Staff Representative
Martin Howard, DEPG

In attendance: Mel Hillman, PDG Administrator

Apologies: were received from:

Cllr Mike Rigby, Somerset West & Taunton Council
Richard Newton, Friends Groups Representative
Ian Young, Somerset & Dorset Railway Trust.

Minute

**Action
by**

1. Introduction

Mike Thompson was welcomed as the new representative of the Heritage Trust.

2. Membership of the Group

Steve Williams outlined changes to the membership and representation to the Group:

Steve had stepped down as the Acting Chairman of the Heritage Trust at its AGM in September 2021 and Mike Thompson had been elected the new Chairman. Mike would be representing the Trust at PDG in future.

Steve had replaced Justin Kerr-Peterson as the Plc representative following Justin's departure from the Railway.

Richard Newton had indicated his willingness to continue as the Friends Groups representative. There had been no other offers.

These changes were accepted unanimously.

2. Minutes of the Previous Meeting

The minutes of the meeting held on 26 May 2021 were AGREED.

3. Matters Arising (not on the agenda)

i) **Charity Led Organisation:** The Plc would be looking at the

proposals again during 2022 and would circulate more details when available.

SW

- ii) **Minehead Café Canopy:** There was no more to report at this time.
- iii) **Re-opening of the Line:** Trains had started running again. Work on the Seaward Way level-crossing had been completed. This had been a complex operation involving many organisations including Somerset County Council, Amey and ORR. The crossing was open and ORR had confirmed satisfaction with the arrangements. All work had been completed and staff trained in the new operation. It was intended the line would be fully operational in 2022. Special mention was made of the contributions by Frank Courtney, John Jenkins and Paul McSharry (Project Manager) in ensuring matters were brought to a satisfactory conclusion.
- iv) **Volunteer Recruitment:** It was confirmed that the current situation with Rod Greenway leading with the support of Matt Sutton was continuing. There was still more to be done and a Working Group had been established which was due to meet later in the month. All Groups were asked to refer any issues around the recruitment and retention of volunteers to Steve Williams or Kerry Noble.
- v) **PLC 3-Year Business Plan:** Steve Williams reported that, due to Covid 19 and changes to the PLC business model, the timetable for developing the plan had been deferred and a completely new plan would be developed in early 2022 with a more commercial orientation and focus on financial viability. A new business model was in development and the new Plan for the next three years would take into account the realities of operating within a pandemic influenced environment.

ALL

4. Election of Chairman and Vice Chairman

Chairman: Steve Williams stated that his term as Chairman had been extended to 18 months but was coming to an end. He asked for expressions of interest. There were none from those present and no previous expressions had been received. Steve was asked to continue for a further two years and this was agreed unanimously. It was felt that this would provide a measure of continuity in the role.

Vice-Chairman: Mike Sherwood agreed to take on this position which was agreed unanimously. He did point out that his term of office of a Trustee of WSRA would end in September 2022 under the articles of the Association and the position **would** have to be re-considered then.

5. PLC-Current Position

Steve summarised the current position. The Railway was now operating to a different model which had been adapted for the period up to the end of October 2021.

The cost of provision of the heritage bus connection between

Dunster and Minehead had been met in part by a grant obtained through Somerset County Council under the Restoring your Business initiative and thanks had been expressed to the County Council for this.

Steve Williams commented that the new model needed to be much sharper and commercially orientated. Running trains with empty seats was no longer an option. COVID arrangements had changed things for the future.

The Winter Maintenance Programme was underway including completion of the Alcombe relay. Work on the relay of the down line at Blue Anchor had been deferred. The Heritage Trust and the WSRA were both helping with funding of projects for 2022. The Heritage Trust would be contributing to the re-painting of four steel bridges as well re-painting some signal boxes and other infrastructure items. The WSRA would be contributing to relaying timber at Blue Anchor and ballast renewals.

It was added that, overall, the WSR had performed reasonably well during 2021. Public comments of financial 'doom' had not happened. There was still much more to be done but the last two months had shown an operational surplus which had been reinvested in the Railway. The Santa and Winter Lights trains were a larger programme than previously. These were on budget with good numbers booked through to the end of the programme.

A question was asked about the outcome of the CHRF3 funding application. Steve Williams confirmed that the bid had been unsuccessful but only because the Railway was now deemed to be in no need of immediate financial support. Members commented that this should be taken as a positive and that the Railway was recovering. It was felt that the Railway could now survive the winter period.

The National Lottery Heritage Fund had advertised a new scheme which was very similar to the previous CHRF1 scheme. The proposals were being considered in time for a new bid by 22 January 2022. This would need Plc approval and there were time capacity issues around completing a new bid.

Martin Adfield reported that he and David Carter had been asked to form an Energy Audit Group reporting to Kerry Noble. Initial replies had found lack of insulation a major issue especially in certain buildings eg signal boxes. Remedying this would require additional funding. Martin was advised to keep Kerry Noble informed of any suggestions to form part of a bid.

MA

WSR Restorations was doing well with a full order book to 2023.

ORR had undertaken two visits this year – in March and October and the railway had been able to satisfy it on most issues. Some work were still to be completed and confirmation from ORR received that they were happy with the outputs..

The Safety Management System (SMS) needed to be a 'live' process and document with someone responsible for ensuring that there was an overview and audit across all aspects of the WSR. The Plc had agreed to advertise for a Safety Compliance Manager to ensure the whole Railway adhered to the more onerous requirements. An advert would be placed within the next week or so for an internal paid role and a fast-track appointment made. This should assure ORR and also help with the additional skills required by staff within the overall operation of the Railway.

Some other activities would re-commence in 2022 as capacity permitted. For example, the Williton Strategic Engineering Review would be restarted. There were a number of linked schemes under consideration at Bishops Lydeard (which would be reported later in the meeting).

The Railway could be cautiously optimistic for 2022. There were still financial issues but the prospects remained reasonably good.

6. Restoring your Railway

A bid was being considered under this Government initiative to help restore rail lines cut after the Beeching Report in the 1960s. The recent re-opening of the Okehampton line was a good example. Bids had to be submitted in January 2021. The Railway was working with the Southwest Local Enterprise Group to have scheduled trains running between Taunton and Bishops Lydeard. Initial discussions had not been successful but had shown that the WSR could undertake certain levels of the work itself. A Project Group had been set up to undertake a feasibility review. GWR and Network Rail had expressed an interest as this might prove evidence for a scoping review for their own needs.

Discussions were also taking place for re-starting the weekend shuttle services from Taunton to Bishops Lydeard in 2022.

One member mentioned another independent scheme proposing running trains from Swindon to Bishops Lydeard via Westbury. The group were in discussions with Network Rail. There were extensive aspirations to start in 2023 and written proposals were now in place for comments. This would be a 'wait and see' proposal at this stage.

7. WSR Heritage Committee

Steve Williams reported that it was proposed to re-establish the Heritage Committee. The Heritage Trust would take the lead on this and Ian Colby (who had chaired the previous attempts) had offered to lead on this as Chairman. There was a lot of heritage work taking place across the Railway which needed pulling together. Steve Williams asked all members of PDG to go back to their Groups and identify potential contributions so they could support the Committee.

The meeting agreed to support the re-establishment of the Heritage

Committee.

8. Proposals for Developments at Bishops Lydeard

Mike Thompson reported that the Heritage Trust was trying to pull together some projects at Bishops Lydeard to improve the overall experience of visitors and help make Bishops Lydeard a visitor destination in its own right.

These schemes included improvements to Platform 1 to entice visitors. The Gauge Museum could be extended southwards to expand museum space so that more heritage carriages could be displayed. The area behind the old cattle dock could be developed to allow visitors see how the dock worked. Plans included being able to cover this area by a glass canopy so that visitors on Platform 2 would be able to see parts of the exhibits and be tempted to cross over to visit them.

ALL

Another suggestion was to utilise Station House and the surrounding area. Plans to use it as a holiday let had been turned down due to the extensive renovation costs to bring to 21st century standards. Other ideas including developing a small retail outlet with a small café area. The upstairs could become a display area and storage of archives. Questions were asked about how the costs for upgrading Station House for other uses would be met. Mike Thompson replied that quotes had been sought for re-roofing and replacing electrics. A planning application for change of use was also being prepared. It was hoped that final plans could result in a combined museum/station house bid for external funding. A further question was asked about the current Plc mortgage on Station House. Steve Williams outlined some proposals to generate income eg café/retail outlet to cover the monthly mortgage costs. In all the plans it was confirmed that great emphasis would be put on recycling items already on the Railway.

Another question was asked about the modern sleeping car stabled near the museum. It was confirmed that this was a privately owned car which was being converted into suitable volunteer accommodation. Plans were in place by the WSRA to remove the current accommodation in the loco compound but the new car would not fit into that area. A suitable location was still being sought. Steve Williams added that this was on the list of actions for 2022.

9. Williton Goods Shed

Martin Howard confirmed that the survey had been completed and had shown that the condition of the building was not as bad as some people had tried to portray. It was a Brunel designed broad gauge heritage building and this was important to its future. The DEPG did not have future plans as it was not suitable for its uses. Moving out would result in DEPG having less covered accommodation but a better use should be found for it. It was still included in the DEPG lease but the building could be offered to another part of the Railway for better use. This could include

provision of better toilets and retail provision. The current platform toilets were original and heritage but did not meet current expectations of visitors. Any programme would need to fit in with the overall requirements and funding. This would be outside of the DEPG range of fund-raising. They were loco restorers not builders. Martin Howard indicating that he was drafting a letter to the Heritage Trust and WSRA for assistance with fund-raising. It was confirmed that the current lease ran to 2032 and included DEPG responsibility for repairs. Mike Sherwood indicated that the WSRA would consider helping.

Steve Williams returned to the re-establishment of the Williton Strategic Engineering Review and how the entire site could be developed together. He would now ask the Plc to accelerate that part of the Review and determine the nature of the repairs to the roof of the Goods Shed through council officers and members of the Infrastructure Team.

There seemed to be three possible options for future use:

- i) An area for static displays of railway stock plus visitor amenities.
- ii) Adding a small café to (i) above
- iii) Static displays plus office and training areas to include toilets.

The proximity to the platform and car parking was important and there was a need to progress this in 2022.

John Parsons raised concerns about the roof repairs and the appearance of the overall station with the scaffolding still in place. Could some sheeting be placed over the roof? Steve Williams replied that the Infrastructure Team had dismissed sheeting as a solution. From the Strategic Engineering Review meeting the previous day it had been agreed to look at making temporary improvements to the roof to enable the scaffolding to be removed.

10. AOB

- i) **Draft Minutes:** Mel Hillman suggested that the publishing of the draft minutes be delayed until early January to avoid any conflicts over the Christmas/New Year period. This was agreed.
- ii) **WST TV:** Martin Adfield reported that he had joined this Group and reported that the Group was open to ideas for developments. The current Winter Lights programme had been well produced and provided a high standard for the future. It was agreed that it was an ideal pan-railway resource which required the support and input of everyone. Mike Thompson commented that from previous experience, these productions needed a good presenter and a good post-production team. This had been achieved in the Winter Lights programme which had achieved a professional standard. It was suggested that contacts with FE College media departments may be beneficial long term. This could help

strengthen resource and community engagement. There had been a spread of positive news about the Railway and the speed of the turnaround had surprised many people.

- iii) **Heritage Trust Education and Community Officer:** It was reported that the contract for Helen Anson had been extended for a further three years. She had been heavily involved in the renovation of the Gauge Museum and had recommenced school visitors including a recent one on the impact of war on the railway and local community. The schools visits were important to help spread knowledge of the history of the railway as well as its long contribution to the economy of the area. This would be a key part of the service and the message needed spreading.
- iv) **Local Government Re-organisation:** Cllr David Hall reported that the elections for the new Somerset Unitary Authority would be held on 5 May 2022. For the first 12 months to May 2023, the new authority would run in tandem with the current District Councils. Cllr Hall did not expect any negative impact on the WSR – in fact, he thought it would be a positive step for the Railway as one of the main attractions in the County. If members had any concerns in the interim, they were asked to contact Cllr Hall to discuss matters.

ALL

11. Culture, Diversity and Environment Programme/People Engagement Group (PEG)

Steve Williams reported that the Group set up had met under the leadership of the WSRA and chaired by Dianna Ricketts-Tanner. The Group had met on the previous day and discussed issues around culture, diversity, environment and ecology.

As a result, the Group would be advertising for a Volunteer Environmental Advisor to assist their work. Members were asked to let Steve Williams know of possible advertising outlets. The role description was being produced. The proposals were fully supported by the PLC. It was now accepted that grant funding applications were now expected to address environmental elements.

ALL

Plans being discussed for the future included providing e-car charging points in the car parks at Bishops Lydeard and Minehead, increasing waste re-cycling and reducing the use of single use plastic.

Discussions had also been held over the WSR contribution to the Queen's Platinum Jubilee celebrations in 2022.

A programme of work for 2022 was being produced and would be shared in due course.

Mike Sherwood was asked to confirm with Dianna Ricketts-Tanner that she would be happy for her contact details to be made public.

MS

12. Date and Time of Next Meeting

It was agreed that the next meeting would be arranged in late March/early April 2022. Mel Hillman would circulate suggested dates with the draft minutes.

MHi

The meeting closed at 11.35am