



# West Somerset Railway P.L.C

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Friday, 27 March 2020

## **Internal and external Memo**

Dear Colleague/supporter,

Yesterday I wrote to our paid staff within the WSR PLC, who are being affected by how Government is instructing us to manage the COVID-19 Virus. You may well have learned of the challenging position we find ourselves in, but it is now time for me to update you formally as a valued volunteer.

Nationally, the situation is changing hour by hour and so I won't be able to answer all the questions you may be asking, I can't deal with all that is worrying you (and me) personally nor for the Company. I would have much preferred to have been able to provide this update in person, this is always how I would prefer to update you. But given where we are and the clear message from the Prime Minister that isn't appropriate.

We have now taken the decision to close the Railway, and this is likely to be the case at least until June this year, maybe longer. I want to be absolutely clear that we believe that the guidance coming from Government must be followed and that with many of our volunteers in the vulnerable groups, it is vital that you do too. We may in time have key persons, signed off by the PLC board and fully briefed and protected attending the Railway, but that is not yet, and this includes the support organisations, tenants etc. We are making this decision in the interests of you as individuals and I hope that the protective measure set in place will look after you all.

It is vital that we all stick together, we will need each other when we are able to reignite our Railway again. The board will need all your skills and efforts, so please do take care over the coming weeks/months.

As we reflect, last year has been described as tumultuous for the WSR, and we all thought 2020 would be the year when we could rebuild and plan again for our long-term future. We were well supported last year and the Company's cash in the bank was poised to see us through until this year's trading enabled us to build it up again. Coronavirus has changed all that.

You will have now read a number of recent communications which have been issued by the Board in order to provide discipline and information. We have done this to help you make sense of this health crisis, to support you as individuals, important people to the Railway and as friends and working colleagues. As time progresses we will of course update you with the ever changing forecast, it's important for me that we keep you in touch as much as is possible and play a part in your well-being. We will communicate :

- Using your registered email address.
- There is a WSR staff Facebook page.

- The office staff are all working from home, and they will answer your email.
- There are names and telephone numbers at the end of this letter and you can call anyone of us for help.
- A regular VLOG will continue after receiving positive feedback.

The WSR is going onto a “care and maintenance” regime. Plans are underway to do regular security checks of the depots at BL, WN and MD, and we are planning for the entire line to be checked. Our next task is to set up arrangements for the stations and sheds etc. We are all aware of the importance of protecting our assets. We are already ahead of this in many ways, but will develop the plan further in the coming days and weeks. This may involve some volunteers coming into help, but this will be strictly controlled and only if absolutely necessary. Those that fall outside of the agreed practice set by the Government must stay away, and there will be no relaxation to this rule.

Thank you to those who have responded to our requests for help. It is vitally important that you follow all the self-protection rules as well as the usual Railway procedures. We are working hard on a Covid-19 business model, yesterday the board wrote to all paid staff informing them that we will be looking to take benefit of the government job retention scheme that supports 80% of our staffing costs. At this time the company is unable to offer to top up the residual 20% of gross pay – a decision taken with some difficulty but in the hope that we can preserve the business for the future. It is hoped that with other support mechanisms available the 20% shortfall in pay will not result in hardship to those families and individuals directly affected. In short we need to save as much money as possible, and wish to avoid entering into loan arrangements even if they were available to the WSR plc. We do care very much about the collective staff and wish to keep you together for when we are through this national emergency.

Our next critical date will 31<sup>st</sup> May 2020, there is no guarantee that the employment subsidy scheme will be extended beyond three months. We will continue to learn as we go and hope that our staff will not suffer hardship. As a business we are living in difficult times, but we will ensure that decisions are made in the best interests of our Railway.

As a board we are confident that we will ride this through and I promise that all our decisions will be made in the absolute best interests of the Railway. I am well aware that not all will find favour, and perhaps not all will be right. But everyone will be made with head and heart to provide the best we can. I have said this in the past and I stand by those remarks again today. For some time we have seen some very negative things in the press and on various social media. These can slowly have their effect if we let them, but I will not let that happen. We face an extremely challenging time, and I really hope that this can stop, and that now more than ever, we can build on the positive, we can champion our success, acknowledge where we have come, shine a light on the wonderful family that is our railway, and move on through this crisis to a bright future. The time for throwing stones is over. We are in the extraordinary times of a National Emergency and we all need to pull together to ensure our railway survives.

We also need to protect ourselves and our families and friends and pray that during this national time of need, that our health and wellbeing is maintained. I will personally lead the Railway through this, fully supported by the Board, so I can ensure that the Railway comes through this, and if I can ask one thing of you, it is that you must follow the governments advice. We will need you to reopen this Railway, and without you we will ne be able to. We look forward to sharing that opening with you ALL!

I do wish to thank those who have responded to our request for help and support. It is always so welcoming to receive these offers, and they really do help. I hope you can see that we are trying not to respond, as some other Railways have done, by taking some pretty drastic staffing decisions. I hope you can see that in the manner in which we are responding, that we are being professional and measured. For now the Railway will begin to advertise that

the closure period will last at least until June 2020, this is stage one of our thoughts, but please be prepared that it may well be longer.

We now need to ensure the Wizzer is placed into a safe 'care and Maintenance' position, to allow the Railway to be safe guarded and to ensure its resilience, that may mean pretty difficult decisions for 2020, but we need to ensure that when the time is appropriate we can reignite both safely and effectively. Further decisions will need to be considered as this health challenge develops, but we will only make decisions when we fully understand all the facts and not before.

I will keep in touch as we work through this journey.

In the meantime look after yourselves and stay safe!

With best regard,



Jonathan Jones-Pratt  
**Chairman**  
For the WSR PLC board

#### **Contacts**

Colleagues also wish to show support in this time and wish to provide some key contact information a below:

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