



# West Somerset Railway Association

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4<sup>th</sup> January 2016

Dear WSRA Member

I am pleased to say that we have now started the Development Plan process. The first step is to publish an Overview Paper, and this is attached to this letter, for your consideration.

Why do we need an Overview Paper? It became clear to us, as soon as we started considering how to draft a Development Plan that there were a wide range of matters where we needed a steer from Members before undertaking detailed work. We hope this will become clear as you read the Overview Paper. The Association has evolved over many years and if we are now to set a new direction, then we need to know what Members want the thrust of that direction to be. Nevertheless, we realise that not everyone will agree with each other, so we will need to continue to consult as we move the process on.

We have deliberately not set a deadline for responses or even a format. Please keep ideas and thoughts coming in, in whatever way is easiest to you.

The next step in this process will be to send out the draft Development Plan, and for those who are able, to meet to discuss it. We currently anticipate this meeting taking place at the end of February, and we will give you a date as soon as possible. I am personally very conscious that many members travel significant distances to attend WSRA business meetings. There are two implications of this. The first is that the meetings need to be restructured so that there is an opportunity for as many as possible to have an input, without the meetings degenerating into some of the recent experiences we have had. The second is that, if people make the effort to journey to a business meeting, then they really deserve some WSR railway experience: this is after all why we all joined the Association. So we will do our very best to plan this in.

Finally, I do need to say that there are some Association procedural matters from the recent past which are still being considered. Rest assured, these have not been forgotten, and are being fully evaluated. We will inform members when matters have been concluded.

With all good wishes for 2016

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Frank Courtney'.

Frank Courtney  
Acting Chairman

**West Somerset Railway Association**  
**DEVELOPMENT PLAN: OVERVIEW PAPER**

**4<sup>th</sup> January 2016**

The West Somerset Railway Association has accumulated activities and operations over its nearly forty year history. Whilst all these activities are, to a greater or lesser extent, worthwhile, it is now timely to decide which ones are appropriate, which should perhaps be passed elsewhere and maybe what other ones should be undertaken. The only way this matter can sensibly be addressed is to return to first principles and try to answer the key question of “what is the purpose of the WSRA?” and also “who or what does it seek to serve?” These questions have to be considered before it is possible to draw up a Development Plan, and so a main aim of this paper is to promote a discussion of these fundamental points.

### **Purpose of Paper**

The purpose of this paper is to summarise the scope of issues that need to be considered within the proposed WSRA Development Plan. It therefore briefly works through both issues and areas of potential future activity, so that these are identified and further work can take place prior to the drafting of the Development Plan. Comments on this paper are welcome.

### **Starting Points**

These are fixed starting points which need to be taken into account:

- Present work and activity. The association is not new, and this is not a “blank sheet of paper” exercise. If new directions are agreed then there has also to be an agreed transition.
- Present legislative structure. The Association has Articles of Association which form the legal basis of the organisation. This is a fixed starting point but they may need to be changed.
- There is currently a trading subsidiary (WSRA (Promotions) Ltd)
- Other partners. The WSRA is not in isolation and changes in the activities of partners may impact on the WSRA and vice versa.
- The WSR plc is the most significant partner.
- There is in a place a Partnership Development Group (PDG) of which the WSRA is a member.
- Current staffing and financial position.
- The WSRA Review Panel Report (the Coombes report), which was published on 4<sup>th</sup> December contains various recommendations<sup>1</sup>.

### **What is the WSRA For?**

The answer to this question depends on who you ask. The Coombes Report appears to conclude that the main purpose of the WSRA is to raise external funds for projects on the railway. However, few other significant size membership organisations are seen by their members mainly in this way. For most membership organisations, the attraction for members is being able in a rather intangible way “to be part” of something. For some other membership organisations, such as the National Trust, the

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<sup>1</sup> The main recommendation of the Review Panel Report concerned the future of the existing Trustees. It is not part of the present paper to consider this, which is being reviewed in other ways.

attraction for many is mainly in the membership concessions. In most membership organisations, contributing financially is a part of the membership, but only part.

In the past, a main function has been to originate and deliver major projects, such as the establishment of the Bishops Lydeard shop, the origination and subsequent operation of the Quantock Belle, the purchase and subsequent management of the Norton Fitzwarren triangle, the purchase and refurbishment of certain locomotives and so on. Clearly there have been fund raising aspects to all these activities, but the most significant involvement has been, firstly, the origination and formulation of the idea, and, second, the project management involved in delivery.

## The Membership

The WSRA is a membership organisation. There are currently about 6000 members, though this has seen some slow decline over the last three years. Membership can be divided into two main groupings. The *active members* are those who spend time on or around the railway on a regular basis, most of whom are active volunteers. This group have been the most vociferous about the future of the Association in recent years. What we call for the purpose of this paper the *inactive members* are those who have joined the Association because it gives them information about the railway and enables them to feel that they are part of the organisation. The inactive members are in a significant majority among the total membership. There is clearly overlap between the two main groupings – and some members will move from one to the other over time, in both directions

If the Development Plan is going to be effective it has to address the needs of **both** these groups, to a greater or lesser extent. It is only through addressing the needs and aspirations of both these groups that the WSRA has any purpose, and it is only through *their* aspirations, that the purpose of the WSRA is to support the railway as a whole. In other words, if, for example, the PDG proposed that the WSRA should undertake a particular activity, then that only has validity if it addresses the needs and wishes of the majority of WSRA members.

This also begs the question of how you determine what those needs and aspirations are. Clearly in broad terms they are “to support the development of the West Somerset Railway”, but that definition is capable of a myriad of interpretations, as the last few years have shown. The last few years have also shown that there may be a mismatch between the views of the active members and of the inactive members. This discontinuity has to be managed.

The main drive for the WSRA is surely to make it the most effective membership support organisation for the railway. What this means in practice, is that the Association is doing what its members want it to do: different members, and groups of members may have different ideas, and it is the task of the Trustees to try to reconcile these. It must be accepted that, at the end of the day, the views of the members may be so disparate that it is NOT possible to reconcile them, in which case a single coherent Association may not be the best model. The advantages and disadvantages of a single Association need to be reviewed.

A further important matter to consider is member benefits. At present members receive a quarterly<sup>2</sup> glossy magazine, and a reduced fare for travel on the railway. The first issue that will need to be resolved is, how far should the membership subscription simply cover the benefits, and how far should it be a contribution to fund raising: there does not currently appear to be any planned differentiation. There also seems to have been an assumption for some years that members do not need to experience some of the day to day features of the railway, because they will already be having considerable contact in other ways. This demonstrates that the Association has made some assumptions about the nature of the membership. So for example, if a member decides to travel from the north of England

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<sup>2</sup> In 2015, only 3 issues were produced.

for a general meeting there should perhaps be some more exciting experience on offer in addition to sitting in a village hall for three hours. This should not be difficult to organise at a very minimal cost.

There are some key features of communication that need to be reviewed, which should reflect the various communications necessary with members. If the Association is describing itself as a membership organisation then it has a responsibility to facilitate communication *from* members as well as to members.

### **The Relationship with the PLC**

It is difficult to see how the WSRA can develop without a positive relationship, at all levels, with the PLC. This requires both sides to have confidence that their views will be listened to and understood. The WSRA will need to re-build respect from the PLC for the contribution it can offer.

Reciprocal board membership has not worked well, and it could be argued that there is almost certainly going to be continuing conflict of interest in reciprocal directorships. Other forms of reciprocal board representation (such as reciprocal observers) need to be investigated.

There is an important need to ensure that where the relationship involves money, then there are clear contracts in place: this is simply good business practice. Payments in either direction need to be made promptly.

The starting point for improving relationships is that the PLC needs to be involved in the WSRA development plan process.

### **Fund Raising**

Over the last year or so, there has been considerable emphasis from various quarters that the WSRA should be mainly a fund raising organisation. Coombes went further than this, and suggested that the WSRA should raise funds only from “outside the railway fence”. There is obviously no necessity that a fund raising organisation need also be a membership organisation. Indeed it could be argued that the two are counter-intuitive. In other words, members of a membership organisation often don't like to be seen mainly as a source of funds. So if the WSRA is mainly a fund raising organisation it begs the question of what are the members for? Are they, in essence, a mailing list for begging letters?

The Development Plan needs to examine this issue in some depth. The PLC has recently appointed a director with the role of fund raising and it may be that there is a relatively finite amount of funding that railway as a whole can draw upon. It is also the case that some types of external funds are only available to not for profit bodies. Any bids for these categories of funds (for example, Heritage Lottery Funding) will require a much closer and better structured relationship with the PLC than currently exists.

The WSRA has not in recent years done very well in making clear where its funding has gone. There is a view that the Association had spent very little to “support the railway”. This depends partly on how the expenditure is described, and one of the disadvantages of allowing the company accountancy firm to present the annual accounts is that they are not best equipped to be sensitive to key presentational matters. In effect much of this information has been “hidden”, such as the rental on Sherrings Yard, which goes to support the work of the Steam Trust. Other significant funding has been spent on the refurbishment of 4561, and of the Quantock Belle. This may not have been the areas of expenditure that those criticising the Association Trustees would have liked to have seen, but it is difficult to argue that it is not in the broadest sense “in support of the railway.” It is crucial that this information becomes much more transparent in the future.

It is highly unlikely that external funding is going to be available, in any significant amount, to support ongoing recurrent or revenue expenditure. Almost all external funding is of the special project variety, supporting capital expenditure. Ways will need to be found to ensure that new special projects do

not end up simply being a long term drain on financial resources, however exciting and attractive they might be. It would be sensible to go further and to say that new capital projects need to end up making a continuing contribution to the viability of the railway as a whole. (There are good examples of this kind of approach elsewhere in the heritage railway sector.)

### **Ownership of Rolling Stock and Locomotives**

Depending on what the purpose of the WSRA is seen to be, it may or may not be appropriate to continue to own and maintain rolling stock including the Quantock Belle and locomotives. This requires significant consideration in any development plan.

### **The Relationship with WSRA (Promotions) Ltd**

Only when the more fundamental questions about the future of the Association have been addressed does it become possible to conclude whether a trading subsidiary is an appropriate vehicle for the Association and, if so, what it should do? If the role or management arrangements for Promotions are to change then a transition plan is particularly important because it is the largest employer in the overall structure. Within this discussion there will need to be a review of the various trading elements.

### **Governance and Financial Management**

Systems need to be reviewed in the short term, and then re-established in the light of the new structure and basis of the organisation. There is also little confidence in the current voting system: this needs to be examined, though it may only be an implementation matter: it is however important that it relies on democratic principles and does not favour any particular group. There is an argument that all voting should be by written communication, rather than some in a general meeting. Finally the issue of charity status, and the detail of the Articles of Association need to be re-examined.

### **Key Issues before a Development Plan**

- What is the primary purpose and function of the WSRA?
- What should be the vision?
- Are the Articles of Association fit for this purpose?
- What do the members expect from the WSRA?
- What is the key to effective PLC relations?
- If the WSRA is to fund raise, what is the rationale for this and what should be the focus?