

WEST SOMERSET RAILWAY

PARTNERSHIP DEVELOPMENT GROUP (PDG)

Minutes of a meeting of the Partnership Development Group
held from 11.00 on Thursday 18 February 2016, in Brunel House, Bishops Lydeard

Present:

Steve Williams (Chairman)	West Somerset Railway PLC
Cllr Jean Adkins	Taunton Deane District Council
Ian Aldridge	WSRA (from item 02/16)
Chris Austin	West Somerset Steam Railway Trust
Cllr Karen Mills	West Somerset Council
Martyn Snell	Employees & Volunteers
Godfrey Baker	Somerset & Dorset Railway Trust
John Cronin	Diesel & Electric Preservation Group
Charlie Field	Somerset County Council

In attendance:

Mel Hillman	Administrator
Sam Hunt	Consultant - S & D Trust (Item 02/16)
Robin Coombes	Chairman - WSRA Review Panel (Item 04/16)

There were no apologies for absence:

The Chairman welcomed Sam Hunt and Robin Coombes to the meeting.

Minute

Action

01/16 WSRA Representative

The Chairman asked whether the members of the Group felt that Ian Aldridge should attend the meeting as a representative of the WSRA. Ian was asked to remain outside of the meeting for this discussion.

It was felt that whatever Ian's current status within the WSRA, he had represented the WSRA at the previous meeting and was still an elected Trustee. As such he should be allowed to represent the WSRA. He joined the meeting at this point.

02/16 Somerset & Dorset Railway Trust – Washford Site Proposals

Godfrey Baker introduced Sam Hunt who had been engaged by the S & D Trust as a result of a grant received from the Association of Independent Museums. Sam had been tasked with drawing up plans for the development of the Washford site with a brief to give a visitor focus to an attraction that secures the sites' long-term sustainability and preservation of the collection which would be better presented for visitors and encourage visitors to start and end visits to the WSR from Washford Station.

Sam Hunt gave an on-screen presentation outlining the impetus for change including the lease renewal due in 2020, the restoration of SDJR carriages, the 50th Anniversary possibilities and the maintenance cycle.

In the long term it had been felt that major restoration may be better undertaken elsewhere by outsourcing. Having a large workshop and rusty wagons on-site was questioned on a restricted site. It had been confirmed that the site included a grassed area beside the main road. The fact that the station was highly visible from the road was a major asset. Together with co-operation over car-parking with the landlord of the adjoining pub it might be possible to develop the site and subject to planning approval, include the grassed area in the parking proposals. There would be visibility issues to be confirmed.

The current site was split by the main running line and there were major concerns about the safety of the un-guarded crossing on the running line.

Sam Hunt gave a detailed overview of possible developments to create a visitor attraction including improving the displays to show the story of the S & D in a more accessible way. The Washford Signal box was probably the best exhibit at the moment.

The plans also included building a new pedestrian footbridge over the tracks at the Blue Anchor end of the station to give safe access to the far side of the site. The other ideas included moving the current Wells building to the far end of the site and to create an education centre as well.

In the overall plan, increased car parking space would be essential. It was noted that the grassed area had not been designated as an area of special scientific interest. The current access over the tracks could be retained for disabled access through a proper electronic gating system.

The next steps would be to formulate a bid to the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) this year and to start local fund-raising by 2017. There would be further development studies and round 2 of the HLF process in 2017 with project delivery from 2018 onwards. The estimated costs would be between £1.5m and £1.75m.

Sam Hunt then outlined elements of the process including anticipating aspirations, joining the dots to add value to the provision, developing a development and investment strategy and to look at lessons from elsewhere, including partnerships.

Cllr Karen Mills commented that this was the first scheme that had excited her since joining PDG. There was a shortage of museums in West Somerset and this proposal would improve that situation. Cllr Jean Adkins commented that she was sure that Taunton Deane District Council would support such a scheme due to the economic development possibilities.

John Cronin added that there needed to be a co-ordinated approach to the fund-raising with an overall plan outlined in a glossy format as already produced by some other Heritage railways. The product should be larger than individual sites. Chris Austin commented that this was similar to work being undertaken for the Bishops Lydeard site. The need is for a clear WSR strategy on museums to distinguish between the nature of the S&D Trust proposal at Washford and the proposal being

developed for an enlarged museum at BL, for the benefit of potential future funding bodies. It was confirmed that bids to HLF would not conflict and would be carefully timed and phased. He had spoken to Mark Smith, Chairman of the Heritage Committee about a strategy for the WSR including the provision of museum facilities. Steve Williams added that further work would be ongoing on planning and development to 'join up the dots'. Martyn Snell commented that a good partnership with the pub landlord would be crucial not just for car parking but also in the supply of refreshments. He also queried the intention of the Plc to develop a loop at the station and how this would fit into the proposals. Steve Williams replied that the Plc would want operational access to the other line but a loop would now be provided elsewhere. He added that the renewal of the lease should not be an issue and a larger lease might be possible. Ian Aldridge stated that the WSRA would give the scheme every support.

Cllr Jean Adkins queried that the proposals to tell a wider story of railways at Washford might not be the best use of resources. The Washford site would be better suited to the S & D story and the proposed developments at Bishops Lydeard may be the better place for the wider story. The inclusion of a model railway may add to the appeal, especially for younger people.

SW

Steve Williams stated that it was intended to present a briefing paper to Plc Board on 27 February 2016 to obtain support in principle. There would need to be more detailed costs and clarification of ideas before full support and agreement by the PLC was given. This would be a first stage of improving the 'customer offer' along the line. The PDG gave a unanimous statement of support to the proposals. Cllr Karen Mills asked if she could have a copy of the full report. Godfrey Baker would provide this.

GB

Thanks were expressed to Sam Hunt who then left the meeting.

03/16 Somerset County Council – Leasehold

Charlie Field reported that it was intended to conclude the current discussions with the Plc over the renewal of the lease. The timetable for this process was summarised as:

- Heads of terms to be prepared and presented to PDG for consideration by the end of March. (PDG would meet on 31 March 2016 for this purpose),
- Legal agreement to be drawn up and finalised during April 2016
- Final sign off by SCC and WSR PLC in May 2016.

This would then enable the final agreement to be presented to the PLC AGM in June 2016 and facilitate commercial discussions with PLC railway stakeholder organisations on revised leases/licenses of up to 50 years in duration.

CF

04/16 WSRA Review Report (The Coombes Report)

Robin Coombes was welcomed to the meeting. Robin stated that the comments he was about to make were his personal ones. The Review Panel had completed its task and had disbanded. In view of the nature of the Report, Ian Aldridge was given the option to withdraw. He elected to remain. It was noted that the Review had been solely focussed on the internal issues of the WSRA.

Robin gave a background to the setting up of the Panel and how it had undertaken its Review. It had a balance of age, gender and membership of partner organisations. It had been set up following a resolution of members of WSRA members. On starting the work, he had no idea of what had been happening within the WSRA. The final Report had been agreed unanimously by the Panel.

It had been found that the governance of the Association had not been fit for purpose and the Panel had agreed that the current Trustees should resign. Concerns had been expressed about the perception to the public about the impact the issues were having on the whole railway family.

Robin posed three questions for the meeting:

- What were the wider lessons to be learnt?
- What does the PDG need to do for the future?
- What are the issues for PDG to deal with?

The lesson to be learnt was the fundamental lack of training and expertise amongst the Trustees especially around finance. Staff in safety crucial roles required rigorous training and certification, whereas a Trustee or Director did not and did not receive any further training in the role. The problems went way back but it was now important to focus on the future and decide where the railway family wished to go. The failure of leadership could not be allowed to happen again. There had been signs of paranoia within the Trustees who acting together within their 'bunker', had become dysfunctional and caused problems across the railway family and had been recorded in the national Heritage Railway media. Robin added that all groups on the railway need to look at themselves and undertake a health check that they were operating properly.

ALL

In regards to the future, it would be necessary to portray a message of total unity within the whole railway family. Whether the current Trustees wished to listen would be up to them as a 'fight to the end' would only further damage the reputation of railway as a whole.

Could the WSRA survive? Would the other groups want to save it? Robin stated that the first step would be to put new Trustees in place with suitable and qualified replacements. All groups could help in identifying suitable people. There would be no short term solution to the period of stabilisation, but as all groups would respond to an emergency situation on the railway, this was equally as important in order to carve out a new WSRA.

The question was posed 'what is the role of the WSRA?' Robin believed it included getting new people involved in the Railway including involving more young people and developing the education role. There would be a need for a clean sweep before any progress could be made.

The Chairman commented that this issue was not about individuals but what the WSRA needed to do for itself. The key point was what could PDG do collectively?

Cllr Karen Mills expressed concerns about local authority representatives becoming involved as it was an internal matter and the full position was not known. Cllr Jean Adkins agreed that whilst it would be inappropriate to interfere with internal matters but PDG did have a strategic role and it would weaken that role if the local authority representatives were not involved. She suggested writing a letter from PDG to the Trustees outlining the impact to the wider railway of their decisions.

Another comment was made that, amongst all groups, things had been 'going backwards' with little contact with schools and engaging young people. It was a fact that the PLC held the leasehold. The Trustees had not understood their responsibilities as a charity. Steve Williams added that he had previously been Company Secretary of the WSRA on two occasions and had tried to improve procedures. The formal papers existed but in the past six years it would appear that not much had happened to address the issues.

John Cronin added that a clause needed to be included for the future that Trustee training was essential, as was a probationary period. He added that there needed to be a greater understanding across the railway and a clear view of how the groups fitted together. However, some progress has been made and Steve Williams briefly outlined the recent rigorous selection and appointment process for new Directors of the PLC as part of the Organisational Review programme.

The question was posed as to whether there was clarity of the role of the WSRA going forward. Robin Coombes reminded the meeting that the Panel focus had been on the WSRA not the whole WSR. Martyn Snell commented that he had been a member of the Panel. He stated that this issue was now the main talking point across the railway and it was affecting morale across the railway. He attended recent trade shows and he had been asked questions there about the problems on the WSR and not specific to the WSRA.

Chris Austin also mentioned he had been a member of the Panel which had drawn on a wide range of written submissions – 90 in total. Although this had been an internal WSRA issue, the problems raised affected the whole railway family and had to be addressed. It was no longer just an internal WSRA matter.

Steve Williams added that the PLC view was that the Report must be actioned by the WSRA membership. The review had shown that the WSRA Corporate Governance was not been where it should have been. The PLC supported the implementation of the recommendations of the Report in full, and once done, would work with the new organisation.

Ian Aldridge stated that he and the WSRA accepted parts of the Report and had hoped that the WSRA was on the road to rectify things. However, there were elements in the Report that the WSRA did not support especially the passage set out in the last section where it committed the Trustees to contravene the Articles of Association, but accept the need to change. Through their interjections, others had not allowed this to flow. The WSRA was where it was and there was a need to build bridges. He accepted that things had gone downhill with no structure in place. This had happened over a period of time with various chairmen and secretaries in place. It had been stated that the Trustees had agreed to stand down at the AGM in July. The issues had not totally been the fault of the current Trustees. Any newcomers would have a large job to undertake in developing new structures as well as running the organisation.

When asked if the proposed EGM scheduled for 27 February 2016 would go ahead, Ian replied 'not to my knowledge'.

(Cllr Karen Mills left at this point to attend another scheduled meeting).

The Chairman asked if the PDG supported the Coombes Report. This was AGREED including the local authority representatives and it was asked that the recommendations be implemented as soon as reasonably practicable.

SW

Ian Aldridge was asked if he supported the Report and the implementation of its recommendations as an individual or as Chairman. He replied he supported the Report as both but had reservations about some of the recommendations as he had stated earlier.

It was AGREED that a letter would be compiled to encourage engagement of the WSRA with the implementation of the Coombes report and improvements to the corporate governance arrangements. The key points would include:

SW

- That the Partnership Development Group agrees that the Coombes Report recommendations should be implemented in full by the WSRA,
- That the Partnership Development Group supported the continuation of the West Somerset Railway Association as a key stakeholder organisation in the running and development of the railway,
- Partnership Development Group will do all that it can both collectively and individually to help the West Somerset Railway Association to implement the Coombes Report in terms of the wider issues for the railway family.

SW/MH

The meeting took a vote on the above proposals and this was unanimous with the caveats expressed by Ian Aldridge on the wider Report being noted. The Chairman would produce a draft and circulate to members to share with their organisations. This would also be posted on PLC websites and shared with wider social media outlets.

SW

Martyn Snell queried whether the WSRA name was now damaged and whether a new name was required for whatever new organisation emerged.

Steve Williams closed this discussion by stating that the PDG did need to take on board the comments about the role of the WSRA on the wider railway and the lessons to be learnt. The matter would be picked up further at the next meeting on 31 March 2016. **SW**

Robin Coombes was thanked for his input and left the meeting. (Ian Aldridge also left the meeting at this point).

05/16 Minutes of Previous Meeting

The minutes of the previous meeting held on 30 November 2015 were APPROVED.

06/16 Matters Arising

Minute 79/15 Terms of Reference. The Chairman apologised that these had not been circulated. They would be placed on the next agenda. **MH/SW**

Other items were agenda items for the current meeting.

07/16 Bishops Lydeard 'Southern Gateway' Proposals

The Chairman reported that significant progress was being made and that a presentation would be made to PDG at the next meeting after 31 March 2016. There was a query whether the plans should go to the Heritage Committee first. It was noted that three members of PDG also sat on that Committee.

The finalised track work and site operating plans had been produced. Steve Williams was writing the final consolidated planning brief. Work on the loco compound was progressing well.

The Plc Board had approved plans for the closure of Brunel House. A potential solution on new internal inward investment was under consideration. The Plc was seeking a master planner for the project in order to make the technical plans. An appointment of a project manager was close. This would be a single overall post, subject to agreement of other partners.

Taylor Wimpey were finalising enabling work and had submitted a planning application for a further 15 houses on the Station Farm site.

The Plc had submitted a planning application for an expanded children's area along with an additional 30 car parking spaces. There had also been discussions around the acquisition of the car park and toilets.

It was confirmed that discussions had been held with Chris Austin over a possible HLF bid and how much enabling work could be included. The S & D bid would be before any bid for Bishops Lydeard. With the Steam Trust leading on this there should be no conflicts. **SW/CA**

Steve Williams also confirmed that he and others would be attending a meeting of Norton Fitzwarren Parish Council on 7 March 2016 to informally present on work to date. Jean Adkins said that she was a member of the Council and would be there. **SW/CA**

08/16 Williton Site Developments

The Chairman indicated that, in the current climate, it has been decided by the Plc Board not to move forward as it was not clear who were the responsible officers of the WSRA. Behind the scenes the Plc had been ensuring that their plans for the site were viable and had consulted with the other partners on site.

(Ian Aldridge returned to the meeting at this point).

It had been indicated to all Groups on site that business should continue as usual for the time-being. This was purely a timing issue with no hidden agendas. The Williton Site Development Group would be reconvened once things were ready to move forward.

John Cronin raised some concerns about the safety of one of the buildings and urged that attention be given to the whole site. The station buildings were the only ones engineered by Brunel and the 'Brunel Legend' should be used as a marketing tool for the Railway. The Chairman informed the meeting that the Plc Board saw the Williton Site as the future engineering centre for the Railway and had agreed to look at the station buildings and goods shed to develop as a visitor attraction. This would require further consideration to include facilities for visitors eg catering outlet.

Steve Williams said that he was prepared to consider a phased approach to Williton and agreed to propose to the PLC Board that the two-stage process be initiated with phase 1 being discussions with all organisations with the exception of the WSRA and phase 2 coming later when the future of the Association in relation to the Coombes Report was clearer. This approach was supported by John Cronin. **SW**

09/16 Minehead Vision and Economic Plan

The Chairman reported that the draft Economic Plan was expected soon. If it impacted on Minehead Station there would need to be a revision to the 3-year Plan. **SW**

10/16 Taunton – Bishops Lydeard Link

The Chairman reported that there had been a very positive meeting in January which had indicated interest from GWR and Network Rail that this may be included as a pilot project sooner than later. There was a feeling that it could be done. It had been confirmed that there would be no impediment to access into Platform 1 although there might be construction issues for access to Platform 3. This would be an agenda item for the April meeting of PDG. **SW/MH**

11/16 Friends Groups Representative

Chris Austin and Martyn Snell reported that they had failed to find a replacement for Tim Stanger. As an interim measure, Martyn Snell agreed to cover both posts and would write to the Friends Groups to seek their endorsement. This was AGREED and Martyn was thanked for his kind offer.

MS

12/16 AOB

- i) Referring to the PLC Vision Paper, John Cronin commented that there had been no routine track maintenance this winter due to re-lays. He raised concerns about the Mineral Line Bridge and what was being done to address the issues. The Chairman replied that the Infrastructure Manager had been asked to produce a Bridge Plan and once complete, work on bridges along the line would be identified and prioritised. The Chairman would follow-up on this.
- ii) Cllr Jean Adkins queried whether the Steam Rally & Fayre would be taking place due to the issues within the WSRA. She was assured that it was and that the leaflets were now available.

SW

13/16 Date of Next Meeting.

The next meeting would be held from:

10.00 on Thursday 31 March 2016 in Brunel House, Bishops Lydeard.

The meeting closed at 13.15