

WEST SOMERSET RAILWAY
PARTNERSHIP DEVELOPMENT GROUP (PDG)

Minutes of a meeting of the PDG held on-line via Zoom software
from 09.00 on Wednesday 26 May 2021

Present: Steve Williams, West Somerset Railway Heritage Trust (Chair)
Jonathan Jones-Pratt, West Somerset Railway Plc
(Deputising for Justin Kerr-Peterson)
Mike Sherwood, West Somerset Railway Association
Ian Young, Somerset and Dorset Trust
John Parsons, Station Masters Representative
Martin Adfield, Staff Representative
Martin Howard, DEPG
Cllr Mike Rigby, Somerset West & Taunton Council

In attendance: Mel Hillman, PDG Administrator

Apologies: were received and accepted from:
Justin Kerr-Peterson, West Somerset Railway Plc
Cllr David Hall, Somerset County Council
Richard Newton, Friends Groups Representative

Minute

**Action
by**

1. Introduction

Jonathan Jones-Pratt was welcomed to the meeting to deputise for Justin Kerr-Peterson.

2. Minutes of the Previous Meeting

The minutes of the meeting held on 24 February 2021 were AGREED.

3. Matters Arising (not on the agenda)

- i) Minute 5. Charity Lead Organisation. Jonathan Jones-Pratt explained why the Plc had withdrawn from the proposals presented to the previous meeting of PDG. Since that meeting, the Plc had taken a different view. Following a presentation to the Plc Board by the Steering Group, it had been agreed that the new structure would be inappropriate at the current time due to the constraints of keeping the business running whilst recovering from the effects of COVID. The decision had been taken in the best interests of the company. He added that the Bailey Report had been one vision and there could be others. The Plc Shareholders had been informed and the responses had been of a positive nature. Mike Sherwood asked if the situation would be explained in more detail at the next Plc AGM. It was confirmed that it would as the Plc would require the confidence to effect change and this would include independent and proper advice. It was felt that if change was necessary, it should be the right change accepted by everyone.

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ii) Minute 11(i) Minehead Café Canopy. At the last meeting concern had been expressed about the aesthetics of the café building now that the council had removed the canopy. It was reported that there had been a roof leak in the café which the council had paid to have repaired. Jonathan Jones-Pratt commented, that although it may not be in keeping with the other buildings at the station, it was tidy and smart and the new roofing did fit in. A local artist who had been commissioned to paint murals on some buildings in the town, had been approached with a view to placing some on the café wall. It had not been an easy issue.

4. Re-Opening of the Railway

Jonathan Jones-Pratt confirmed that services had started in the previous weekend. Thanks were extended to staff for preparing the rolling stock, track and other infrastructure to enable this to happen. The train had looked superb with all newly painted coaches and a fully restored engine.

The operation had had to be planned within COVID restrictions. There had been a slow uptake of patronage as many people still had concerns about being out and about. The focused activities alongside had received better patronage. The booking office will be re-opening on the next weekend to cater for 'walk-in' passenger who turned up last weekend. The situation will be closely monitored.

The service will be extended from Williton to Watchet the next weekend and to Dunster the following weekend ie 5 June 2021. The safety compliance plan submitted to ORR had been agreed and signed off.

There were still concerns about the overall cashflow position and the furlough provisions had been reviewed. There would need to be a lean operation and a much shorter running season. Some services had been cut and the trains would not run on Mondays and Fridays. The welfare of staff had also been taken into consideration in this decision.

Plans were being made for a much larger Christmas 2021 programme, starting in November. Trains would run to Dunster where the layout could cope with run-rounds.

5. Seaward Way Level Crossing Update

Jonathan Jones-Pratt explained the unavoidable delays in the upgrade to the level crossing. There were three parties involved, ie Somerset County Council, the ORR approved contactors and the Plc. The costs had increased due to COVID. There had been budgets issues and payment delays with the County Council. The statutory 2-month consultation period had been completed and work started. A picture of the works on social media had caused a 10-day delay to the work whilst checks were made. This had made the situation difficult to manage. An experienced site project

manager had now been appointed. Further delays remained around agreeing the budget payments.

It was hoped that the crossing could be open from September. In the meanwhile, it was hoped to operate an onward bus service from Dunster to Minehead where all the facilities would be open.

In answer to a question about mainline excursions on the line, it was confirmed that, at the moment, these would happen and discussions had been held with the operators. There had been some complex issues to overcome due to ORR restrictions.

Jonathan Jones-Pratt indicated that the Plc Board had been doing what it thought best for the Railway as quickly as possible. There would need to be a programme of change management for staff to operate the new crossing. This could be a high risk in the high season if not implemented correctly.

Cllr Mike Rigby offered to make contact with officers of Somerset County Council and Somerset West & Taunton Council if it were felt he could influence actions. Cllr Rigby and Jonathon Jones-Pratt would discuss this outside of this meeting.

MR/JJP

Martin Adfield asked if there were plans for any further reductions in services so that staff could be informed and rosters amended. It was confirmed that HOPS was now the main communication channel for staff across the Railway. In the current circumstances, things did move quickly but the Plc would endeavour to keep staff up to date.

6. 2021 Emergency Funding

Steve Williams confirmed that after a first successful bid of £900,000 to the CRRF, a second bid for £400,000 had been rejected as the Railway was now considered a commercial organisation and not a 'not for profit' organisation. The outcome of a Stage 2 complaint was expected shortly. Two local MPs had been asked to make representations to the relevant government departments.

The Plc Board had agreed at a meeting on 25 May 2021 to launch another public appeal to help under-pin the operational costs. It had been decided that to avoid politics, the Plc would go ahead alone in this appeal. The target would be £1m and the appeal would be launched within the next week to help meet operational costs and contribute to the ongoing winter works programme.

ALL

The Heritage Trust and Association would be asked to provide project funding within their objectives.

Mike Sherwood asked why there had been a change in the target to £1m. It was explained that this had been to help with clamping down on pressures on Plc reserves as well as to fund longer term investment. Worst case scenarios had been modelled. Current usage was around 50% of capacity.

7. Culture, Diversity and Environment Programme/People Engagement Group

Steve Williams confirmed that this initiative had ended at the end of March 2021 and had established a programme to enable the Railway to adapt to the modern world whilst retaining heritage aspects. Environmental and Green issues would need to be built into what the Railway did.

The Group, which had been set up as part of the CHLF bid, would continue for the foreseeable future led by Diana Ricketts-Tanner. Diana would be asked to make a presentation to the next meeting of PDG. This would look at the benefits of additional funding and use of heritage staff.

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8. Volunteer Recruitment and Development

Steve Williams confirmed that there had been a smooth transition of volunteer responsibility from the WSRA to the Plc. Rodney Greenway had been appointed as temporary manager supported by Mark Sutton. They would be implementing the recruitment and management plans.

All Groups and Organisations were encouraged to work with Rodney if they required volunteers so that the numbers of volunteers and the skill base could grow. Steve Williams would ask Rodney to contact Groups.

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Mel Hillman was asked to inform Richard Newton on behalf of the Friends Groups about this arrangement.

MHi

9. PLC Three-Year Business Plan

Steve Williams confirmed that he was leading on this and the Plan had been discussed by the Plc Board earlier in the week. It was intended that it would reflect the business aspirations of all organisations across the Railway so that there was a better understanding on all priorities. Steve Williams asked that all organisations let me know what the Plc need to consider. The Plan would be circulated to all in the next couple of weeks.

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10. Any Other Business

i) Williton Good Shed. John Parsons raised some issues about the Goods Shed which were discussed in detail. Steve Williams agreed to follow this up with the Infrastructure Manager and confirmed that the independent structural survey was due later in the week and would be shared with the DEPG. The Strategy Group would still be discussing the wider issues for the Williton site, including options for the Goods Shed.

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11. Date and Time of Next Meeting

To be agreed. The meeting closed at 10.10am