

WEST SOMERSET RAILWAY

PARTNERSHIP DEVELOPMENT GROUP (PDG)

Minutes of the Inaugural Meeting of the Partnership Development Group held from 10.00 on Thursday 30 October 2014 in Brunel House, Bishops Lydeard

Present:

Steve Williams (Chairman)	West Somerset Railway PLC
David Williams	Chairman - West Somerset Railway Association
Chris Austin	West Somerset Steam Railway Trust
John Cronin	Diesel & Electric Preservation Group
Cllr Karen Mills	West Somerset District Council
Cllr Ian Melhuish	West Somerset District Council

In attendance:

John Irven	Chairman – West Somerset Railway PLC
Mel Hillman	Administrator

Apologies were received from:

Tim Stanger	Friends of Stations Group and FOWSR
James Stubbs	Somerset County Council
Martin Snell	Employees and Volunteers
Godfrey Baker	Somerset & Dorset Trust

Minute

Action

1/14 Welcome & Introductions

Steve Williams thanked everyone for responding to the invitation to attend the meeting. Everyone present introduced themselves and gave a brief outline of their organisations and roles.

2/14 Chairman – West Somerset Railway PLC

John Irven explained that he would not be a regular member of the Group. He had asked for an explanatory letter to be sent out prior to the meeting which outlined the background to the setting up of the Group.

The intention was to improve communication to the wider Railway community. The formation of the Group and date of this first meeting had been conveyed to the last Wider Stakeholder Consultation Meeting held on 18 October 2014. This gave an opportunity for the PLC to provide an update of its activities and current position as well as dealing with questions from the floor and providing suitable answers.

The link to the supporting papers can be followed here:

(<http://westsomersetrailway.vticket.co.uk/article.php/967/west-somerset-railway-stakeholder-meeting/f745dae508842f02a8232aea64de825a>)

The PLC had published a 10 year Corporate Plan backed up with a 3 year and 1 year Business Plan. This included the desire to involve the wider Railway community as well as involving the local District Councils

with their economic development responsibilities and Somerset County Council with its transport responsibility as well as the owners of the freehold of the Railway. It was intended that the Group would have the equivalent status of other PLC committees and to work to that effect. It would be a requirement for the members of the Group to provide feedback to their organisations. Any issues agreed on Governance would need to be in line with the overall safety requirements of the PLC as the Operating Authority for the Railway.

There was an intention that the Group should meet at least 4 times a year. This was queried by some members of the Group who felt it should meet more frequently. This would be addressed later in the meeting when future dates were agreed.

It was intended that the Chairmanship of the Group would rotate on an annual basis with the PLC providing the initial Chairman.

Somerset County Council (SCC) had indicated that the freehold of the Railway was not for sale. The Chairman of the County Council had indicated that the Partnership Development Group was key in the longer term development of the whole Railway. If the decision was changed in the future to sell the freehold it would not be sold outside of the WSR 'Family'. There were still ongoing negotiations between SCC and the PLC over commercial leases with a need for the PLC to be able to issue sub-leases and to extend other leases.

It was acknowledged that the Charities represented within the Group could attract outside funding and this would be important for future funding of developments.

The wider transport issues eg Bishops Lydeard to Taunton links also needed to be addressed.

The intention was for the Group to be able to take real actions and not just be a 'talking shop'.

[NB: the next paragraph was agreed under 'approval of minutes' at the second meeting following objections to the first draft minute. The revised minute was approved]

David Williams raised concerns about the Group discussing the freehold issue. The WSRA had made it very clear from the outset and had placed in writing (18 May 2014) this objection as it did not see the Group as the correct place for this to be discussed and/or agreed. John Irven indicated that SCC had written that it was their intention that this stakeholder group would be the forum in which they would expect consultation over the issue to be undertaken if required at any point in the future. This view was confirmed by James Stubbs on behalf of SCC and was supported by the majority of those present at the meeting.

3/14 Election of Chairman

It was AGREED that Steve Williams would be the Chairman for the first year with a rotating Chairman every year thereafter.

4/14 Terms of Reference

A draft document had been circulated prior to the meeting. This had been developed by Steve Williams and had not yet been seen by the PLC Board.

After discussion it was agreed to amend the purpose of the Group to read:

'To act as a discussion forum and information exchange to disseminate and share information on developments affecting the WSR partners and organizations across the WSR. To enable each participant to influence and inform the plans and projects of the other stakeholders and to be a platform for dissemination and sharing of knowledge and expertise, ensuring that such developments are mutually compatible'.

The frequency of meetings would be confirmed later in the meeting.

The Terms of Reference would be reviewed annually or sooner if required.

With these amendments the Terms of Reference were AGREED.

5/14 Governance Framework

A draft document had been circulated prior to the meeting. Steve Williams anticipated that each organisation would have its own frameworks but there would be a need for consistency and continuity in which the Group operated.

David Williams raised a concern over the voting proposals. He did not wish the WSRA to be constrained by a vote taken by the Group and the wider stakeholders. He understood that the PLC had consulted around 70 groups and the WSRA were not aware of all these groups. He hoped that all decisions would be taken by a consensus. In discussion other members felt that a voting system would be necessary. The proposal for a 75% minimum majority in favour of a decision was felt to be quite high. Steve Williams assured the meeting that only the nominated representatives at each meeting would be eligible to vote. It was also noted that the Group would not be running the Railway; rather using best knowledge to support the Railway. Many key decisions would be made by the Partner Groups unless delegated to PDG. David Williams agreed to take the proposal back to the WSRA Board for consultation. It was also agreed that each organization would do likewise. Steve Williams would also consult the five organisations not represented at the meeting.

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In further discussion it was agreed that there should be a provision to co-opt others as necessary for specific issues. Steve Williams agreed to produce an updated version of the Governance Document and circulate so that members could take back to their organisations for discussion and agreement.

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In conclusion David Williams stated that the WSRA did not wish to be obstructive. It wished to look for consensus among the various voluntary organisations on the way forward.

6/14 Organisation's Perspectives

Each Organisation was asked to outline its perspectives on the work of the Group:

- a) **WSRA** – David Williams stated that the WSRA hoped to be positive and help achieve what was necessary as a charity. He added that it was hoped that the ideas put forward by the WSRA would fit into the wider aspirations of the WSR as a whole. The land owned at Norton Fitzwarren had the potential for development and would need consideration of what could be undertaken in line with relevant planning and local authority transport plans. The WSRA also wished to be involved in decisions around facilities at Williton bearing in mind its charitable status and the restrictions involved. There were no plans to become involved in the day to day business but the WSRA could play a full role in helping attract inward investment. The PDG would be the medium through which the WSR looks at what it wants to do and then determine the WSRA role.
- b) **DEPG** – John Cronin felt there was a need to look at where the Railway was at, refer to the 10 year Corporate Plan and how to interpret that into reality in order to sell it to the many volunteers who would make it work eg reviewing the Norton Fitzwarren triangle where one curve was too severe to permit passenger trains, restricting movements during events. This would be an agenda item for the next meeting. SW/MH
- c) **Steam Trust** – Chris Austin commented that the Steam Trust was a small charity which did not own any land. It sought security and peace of mind in knowing what other groups were doing. They had space in the Bishops Lydeard museum and at Williton. There were no formal contracts in place but they did retain excellent working relationships.
- d) **West Somerset District Council** – Karen Mills stated the District Council had two goals for the WSR. Firstly sustainability as the main tourist attraction in West Somerset and a substantial employer (50 employees). Secondly any link to Taunton which could impact on the wider economic development of the area, bringing more visitors into the area. Ian Melhuish added that it would be better for the Council to know about proposed developments beforehand rather than when too late. The exchange of information would be important in this respect.

Steve Williams would contact the Groups not present and ask them to submit a written summary for the next meeting SW

7/14 Bishop Lydeard – Taunton Link

Steve Williams commented that that the Bishops Lydeard to Taunton link was one of the aspirations within the 10 year Corporate Plan. A working group had been established to look into this and supporting papers were available. Somerset County Council as the transport authority had been invited to be involved and David Mitchel (Transport Sustainability Officer) had attended meetings. The debate had been around the real practicability of such a link and the historical expectations of a possible

commuter service.

Discussions had been held with First Great Western and Network Rail as well as the General Manager of the PLC about the possibilities. This had included an initial diesel hauled service but steam had not been ruled out but there would be a need to be pragmatic about the environment in which such a service could operate. The initial discussions around costs determined such costs could be prohibitive with alterations to track and signalling. The proposals to electrify the main Exeter – Taunton line would have an impact. The future of the Cardiff – Taunton service could be in doubt, although an extension to Bishops Lydeard could be considered.

Any developments around Station Farm at Bishops Lydeard could be included within any wider developments at that venue. Again there was scope for more joined up thinking. There had been a scoping exercise by SCC initially and a feasibility study agreed. A consultant would be used to develop a Business Plan.

Steve Williams named three projects where Heritage Railways had recently negotiated access to Network lines:

- a) North York Moors – to Whitby
- b) Bluebell – to East Grinstead
- c) Swanage – to a bay platform at Wareham. Dorset County Council had purchased land to realise this. Heritage diesel units were being fitted out to provide the service.

Possible future funding sources for the WSR could include the County Council and the Coastal Communities Fund.

The 2nd phase of the plan included engagement with District Councils which were now part of this Group. County Councillor Harvey Siggs had taken over responsibility for transport and would support and reflect this in the transport strategy. A lot of background demographic data had been provided by the County Council. A draft document had been delayed but could be presented to the next meeting for discussion as an opportunity to discuss the wider issues to enhance and strengthen the WSR. There were time constraints due to the ongoing Network plans. An Officer group had been established by the South West Peninsula Spine Group to consider the Taunton to Exeter proposals but had not included extension to Bishops Lydeard. Steve Williams had worked to get the link on the agenda of the Officer group but discussions had gone no further.

In discussion John Cronin asked what the benefit in terms of cash would be to the WSR. From other sources he was aware of issues over the financial viability of the North York Moors link to Whitby. Steve Williams replied that there were three potential benefits:

- a) Butlins at Minehead attracted around 500,000 visitors a year of which around 98% travelled by car. There was a significant number of visitors from South Wales and a direct link from Cardiff to Bishops Lydeard could divert some of that traffic to the WSR.
- b) There was data of the demographic growth in the North West of

- c) Taunton and a potential park and ride scheme.
- c) Wider connectivity to Bishops Lydeard from the national Network would broaden opportunities and could help reduce reliability on cars.

Steve Williams added that no work had been undertaken on operating options. The draft document would include the risks.

John Cronin added that the WSR was nowhere near being able to undertake this proposal within current resources. There would be a question of how the PDG could influence decisions and support. It would be important to recognise that any developments at Bishops Lydeard needed to be seen within overall site developments.

David Williams, in response to a question, commented that any development at Norton Fitzwarren would need to be in line with what the WSR as a whole wanted. It would be necessary to determine the facilities needed, how they would be funded and then integrated into the WSR. It was agreed that the WSRA should be invited to join the Taunton – Bishops Lydeard Link Group. David Williams emphasised that the WSRA would not wish to do anything at Norton Fitzwarren in isolation.

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The draft feasibility document would be circulated when available and brought to the PDG at a later date. Members agreed that joined up thinking would be important.

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Chris Austin commented that the proposals had two possible business models:

- a) As a heritage railway run by volunteers as a tourist attraction.
- b) As a genuine commuter service run by paid staff.

There were two markets – the tourist market and potential Butlins market. The potential of two trains on changeover days at Butlins would be a financial possibility. John Irven added that the Chairman of the County Council, Cllr John Osman, had visited the Railway and indicated support of the work of the PDG.

Steve Williams concluded the discussion by stating that any business case would need to stack up in financial, business and impact terms and must not adversely affect the core heritage and preservation role of the WSR.

8/14 Inward Investment

In the absence of Tim Stanger who had proposed this item, Steve Williams informed the meeting that Tim had aspirations that the Group could be the principal vehicle for achieving inward investment for the Railway. This would be a future agenda item.

SW/MH

9/14 Station Farm Development

Documents had been circulated prior to the meeting. This project provided opportunities for all groups and could increase operating

capacity at Bishops Lydeard eg storage of rolling stock. The initial proposals had included the building of a new museum and covered accommodation to provide facilities for the safe storage of preservation materials as well as providing exhibition and educational opportunities.

The project had not really progressed for around 18 months although the views of partners had been sought. Chris Austin commented that there was the possibility of relocating the Heritage Carriage accommodation. The original plans had been amended due to the difficulties identified around the underground water courses on the site. Any potential funding from the Lottery Heritage Fund would need to satisfy the criteria to widen the educational/historical aspect of the Railway. Bishops Lydeard would be a good location for visitors but there would be a need to make the facilities more attractive. David Williams added that the WSRA had been working with the Steam Trust but did not view what happens at Bishops Lydeard in isolation.

Steve Williams felt that there was a need to consider the future operational length of the line. Bishops Lydeard was the 'Gateway to the Railway' but was not the most attractive to visitors. John Cronin cited the issues around access to toilets as a major distraction. John Irven added that there needed to be a focus on the tourist aspects with a balance between attractions and access.

Steve Williams added that Ric Auger had produced the document and was acting as the PLC technical lead on the Group. Steve Williams was joining the Group with a strategic lead brief. The PDG could review where the scheme was currently at. The remit of the Project Group could be extended to include the whole Bishops Lydeard site with membership widened to include the District Councils and John Cronin. This would require new Terms of Reference. David Williams commented that whatever was agreed would be costly and would take time to achieve. For this reason it was vital that any money would only need to be spent once. It was agreed that there was a need to look at all the aspirations and then prioritise the key issues. There was a need to have a clear project plan and work programme for any submission to the Lottery Heritage Fund with all the interdependencies tied up.

Steve Williams proposed that the Project Group be reinstated with new membership to include the County Council, Taunton Deane Borough Council, West Somerset District Council and John Cronin as a specialist

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10/14 PLC Corporate Restructuring

John Irven informed the meeting of recent changes to the structure of the PLC Board. This was a two stage process looking at the role of the PLC Board and its committees. John Irven had been confirmed as the new Chairman with a Leadership/Management background. David Baker had been confirmed as Vice-Chairman and brought a wealth of railway experience. This emphasised the need to balance and compliment the railway and management skills. Directors were being given specific portfolio responsibilities. The way the business was run was also being reviewed in line with implementing the Corporate and Business Plans. The intention was to move to a Non-Executive model supported by a

paid Management Team. Chris Bolt had been appointed as the new Finance Director. Chris brought a wealth of railway knowledge as well as experience within regulatory frameworks. As an economist he brought a strategic aspect to the role. Roger Savill had retired but had agreed to remain as Chief Accountant for 6/12 months to assist in developing a management process for the day to day financial management. A new Head of Commercial Activities had been appointed and suitable Board level support was being identified.

11/14 Future Agenda Items

In response to a request for future agenda items the following were suggested:

- Doubling the section from Minehead to Dunster
- Balancing the timetable with a crossing point at Watchet
- Norton Fitzwarren triangle curve
- Inward Investment
- Opening WS Restoration to the public as a tourist attraction. David Williams added that this would be subject to security of tenure as the current lease ran out in 2016 as well as complying with safety requirements for public access to a working environment.
- Leases including Brunel House. John Irven confirmed that negotiations were underway to extend the lease with SCC but there were issues with the right to sub-lease which still needed to be agreed. The PLC did have a fully protected lease with the SCC which meant that should it fulfil all the terms of the lease, renewal would be automatic.

Steve Williams agreed to contact the Groups not represented at the meeting to obtain their proposals.

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12/14 Any Other Business

- i) It was confirmed that John Irven would attend meetings as appropriate.
- ii) Steve Williams commented that there would be a need to add communications within the Terms of Reference and Governance Framework. Some items may become 'Commercial in Confidence' and decisions would not be shared until all Groups were happy. There would be a need to be seen to be as transparent as possible as there would be expectations on the Group from all aspects of the Railway. It was proposed that the Minutes of PDG be made widely available including publication on websites and dissemination within the participant organisations. A summary sheet could be produced similar to the 'Briefing from the Board' available after Board meeting. David Williams added that summaries could be included in the WSRA quarterly journal. This was AGREED.
- iii) David Williams asked whether the PLC could review the question of departmental contributions to the Journal. Steve Williams said that he would take this back to the PLC board. John Cronin suggested that the Journal should also provide for a regular article

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from the WSR PLC Chairman.
iv) Everyone was thanked for their contributions to the meeting.

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13/14 Future Meetings

After discussion it was agreed that the Group needed to meet monthly in order to maintain impetus. The next meeting was agreed as:

10.00 on Thursday 27 November 2014 in Brunel House, Bishops Lydeard. ALL

The meeting closed at 12.30pm