

We, the undersigned, call on the three principal boards of the West Somerset Railway (WSR), namely; the West Somerset Railway PLC (PLC), the West Somerset Railway Association (WSRA) and the West Somerset Steam Railway Trust (WSSRT) to come together urgently in the best interests of the communities that love and rely on the WSR.

Many livelihoods and businesses are dependent on the WSR being run as a successful and responsible community asset.

Recent negative actions have severely damaged the reputation of the railway at a time when public support and confidence is most needed to survive the significant challenges that COVID-19 presents the WSR. Communications from the PLC are often inappropriately confrontational and poorly written which make readers question the professionalism of the organisation and veracity of the message.

At the heart of the WSR is a committed, skilled and passionate core of over 1000 volunteers who give their time to keep the railway running and contribute to the economy of West Somerset. These volunteers are proud to work for the railway, but many have been upset by the aggressive stance adopted which has most recently brought the railway into public conflict with a local MP and the Somerset and Dorset Railway Trust (S&DRT).

In February, the S&DRT was given 12 months' notice by the PLC to leave Washford, which they have totally transformed from a derelict site over the past 45 years. This notice was issued just two years after signing a 50 year lease extension in good faith. The unedifying public accusations has angered many and has highlighted the lack of trust and cooperation between members of the railway family. The S&DRT's 7F 53808 has been a popular stalwart on the WSR since its restoration in 1987. It is therefore worrying to hear the PLC publicly renege on the hire agreement obligation of overhauling the locomotive before the end of the current arrangement in 2030. The message these actions send out to the wider heritage movement, would be locomotive hirers and community partners is worrying. These are sadly not standalone actions and follow on from painful public sagas involving the railway freehold and several other locomotive groups.

It is clear that the current structure of the railway isn't fit for purpose and a different way forward is required with a charity at the core. This is a model which the vast majority of heritage railways employ successfully in relative harmony. It is highlighted by the often confusing and disjointed way in which the railway raises funds. Currently all three organisations appear to be acting separately, diluting the message and not benefiting fully from valuable gift aid contributions. Applications to the wide variety of available grant funders also appear to be lacking. Whilst the level of support for the current COVID-19 appeal is encouraging, the £500,000 target looks unachievable and we are well behind similar premier league railways which we should aim to emulate such as the North Yorkshire Moors Railway (NYMR), Severn Valley Railway (SVR) and the Gloucestershire Warwickshire Railway (GWSR). These railways have delivered clear messages through simple structures enabling them to also effectively access the wide range of public and private funding sources available.

The WSR has suffered times of hardship before and each time the wider railway family has come together to pull the railway through. Nothing illustrates this more than the financial difficulties of the last few years and sterling efforts made to bring the WSR back from the brink of bankruptcy. However, we cannot and should not allow the rollercoaster pattern of lurching from crisis to crisis to continue.

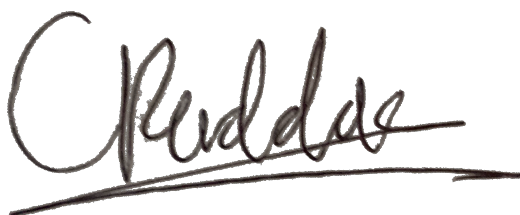
We believe that now is the time for the 3 boards to come together with the full Partnership Development Group (PDG) to formally review the structure of the WSR. Good governance and accountability need to be at the heart of the WSR to ensure it is fit to survive the COVID-19 crisis and enable the railway to flourish for future generations to enjoy.

We would like the 3 boards to come together as a matter of urgency and enact the following:

- 1) Retract the notice to quit issued to the S&DRT and make significant efforts to heal the relationship with this valued member of the railway family.
- 2) Establish an independent review of the organisational structure of the WSR in order to create an organisation which is fit for the future. This should include:
 - A. A review in the context of other premier league heritage railways.
 - B. Ensure that any resulting structure is accountable to volunteers and stakeholders.
- 3) Recall the Partnership Development Group (PDG) to establish a true “One Railway” business plan which is supported by the whole WSR family.

Through the efforts of countless dedicated volunteers and members of staff, the railway has come a long way from when it reopened in 1976. The success has been enjoyed by many others locally who benefit from the tens of thousands of people who ride or visit the line each year. The railway achieves most when everyone pulls together, something which destructive infighting has sadly distracted from recently. Good governance, accountability and a clear structure is key for the WSR to thrive, which is what we all want.

Yours,



+ 542
Signatories

Christopher Ruddick
For and on behalf of 543 Signatories