



West Somerset Railway Association

Registered Charity No. 1041901

WSRA Press Release 11th March 2020

For immediate use.

FALSE CLAIMS MADE AGAINST THE WEST SOMERSET RAILWAY OVER HPC GRANT

The West Somerset Railway Association (WSRA) has become aware of some serious assertions made in a press release issued by local Bridgwater & West Somerset MP Ian Liddell Grainger about the WSR plc, the company's Chairman, and the WSRA (the railways support charity).

In it, the MP suggests the WSR plc has misused grant funds made available to the West Somerset Railway (WSR) by way of a grant from the HPC Community fund to the WSRA.

We find this very disappointing and the claims are totally untrue. Following a written complaint to the MP about the grant, which was also copied to us, we offered our view of the actual facts of the matter to Mr Liddell Grainger MP on Sunday 9th March 2020 in advance of him issuing his press statement.

A summary of those facts is given below:

- The grant was awarded to the WSRA, the registered charity that supports the WSR. The Grant was not awarded to the WSR plc (the operating company of the railway).
- Whilst it is true that the WSR plc and the WSRA have co-operated during the bid phase for the grant, and also during the delivery phase, that is no surprise as it is a joint project.
- As was made clear in the copy letter to Mr Liddell Grainger MP over the weekend, the WSRA has received just over half of the sum to date of the £96,000 which he mentioned in his media statement as this was a two- year project. (The year one spend is actually just over £39,000.)
- The project has undergone several reviews with the grant giver during the time it has been running, all for the benefit of the people in the West Somerset area.

We feel we must now amplify and publish our response as follows:

The project objectives for which the grant was awarded were thus defined as:-

“Mitigating the intangible and residual impacts of (Hinkley Point C) on the communities in (Somerset) through schemes, measures and projects which promote the economic, social or environmental well-being of those communities and enhance their quality of life”.

There were originally two key project objectives supported by a set of 9 KPI's (Key Performance Indicators - the measures by which delivery is assessed by the grant giver):-

- 1) *“To develop skills and increase confidence within the local West Somerset, Taunton Deane and Sedgemoor communities, contributing to the social mobility agenda;”*
- 2) *“To increase and enhance community connections, creating a stronger, more integrated community for Somerset residents and newcomers.”*

The delivered benefit to the community is easily evidenced in various local newspaper reports which clearly carry the HPC branding logo indicating where the support for the events has been derived.

The HPC logo is also present on marketing materials for such events. Events have been run in the local community during 2019, some directly involving the railway in a support role and others reaching out into the community, examples include Somerset Day, the Halloween Spooktacular, and many Train Play clubs run in local venues. These events were all designed to engage with the local community and promote the required funding objectives.

The full-time employee post mentioned by the MP was, in fact, only employed for 25 hours-per-week on this task, but the same person was also employed separately to carry out other tasks for the WSRA for a further 15 hours-per-week. These other tasks are associated with the recruitment of local volunteers to support the WSR. To be 100% clear, this additional work is NOT funded by the HPC Community grant, but by the WSRA as part of its charitable activity in support of the WSR.

There has been clear engagement with both local colleges and with local schools during the first year of the project, and this was indeed included in ONE of the KPI's in the grant.

We note with interest that Mr Liddell Grainger claims that the grant of £96,000 should have been used to support 30 apprentices. Even if the entire grant was used in total to support 30 apprentices as suggested, it would only amount to a bursary of £1,600 per apprentice per year. We ask how this sum could possibly support 30 apprentices in an organisation that relies for its very existence on generous external donations and @1,000 volunteers to ensure its daily operation?

The WSRA would be happy to meet with Ian Liddell Grainger MP to go over the accounts held by the WSRA in respect of this grant funding . At such a meeting, we are confident that the WSRA can not only account for every penny of the money granted, but also show exactly what it was spent on. Had the WSRA ever been asked for such a meeting by the local MP to check out the facts after he had received claims the money had not been used properly, then we would, of course, have agreed

The WSR - what everybody thinks of locally as “the Railway” or more affectionately “the Whizzer” contributes several millions of pounds of much-needed tourist spend every year into the local economy of West Somerset. As such, we find it very disappointing that the WSR should find itself under such an attack, especially when the actual facts would have been simple to verify and any, perhaps legitimate, concerns could easily have been answered if the questions had first been asked.

For further information please make contact via: Dick Wood 07711 552947 or manager@WSRA.org.uk

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