

Friends of Dore and Totley Station (FoDaTS)

Response to DfT's Community Rail Strategy Consultation 21st January 2018

FoDaTS is a group of Friends representing existing and potential users of Dore and Totley Station which is situated in SW Sheffield, South Yorkshire close to the border with Derbyshire. We are also affiliated to the High Peak and Hope Valley Community Rail Partnership (HP&HVCRP) who we understand are submitting a separate response to the consultation.

Our local station sits on the southern Trans-Pennine rail route, the Hope Valley line. Whilst situated in a very pleasant, semi-rural location, it is primarily an urban station with a wide catchment area and patronage growing at above the national average (5.8% growth with some 165,000 passengers in 2016/17). It serves all manner of users especially commuters for Sheffield, Sheffield City Region and the Greater Manchester and Liverpool City Regions (and Manchester Airport) as well as being one of the main gateways for SY to the Peak District National Park: it is without doubt vital to the economic, social, health, educational and recreational well-being of SY and the Region. Set against a backdrop of woodland, some of which carries SSSI status, it operates as a transport interchange for all modes of travel being sited on the A621 primary route with regular stage carriage bus services. We also have a 120 or so space Park and Ride facility with a considerable number parking on surrounding streets. To retain and grow this important facility it is vital that rail services are accessible to all members of the communities which it serves.

Community rail (or more broadly local rail) should be about connecting people to opportunity through partnership groups, organisations, social enterprises and volunteers. As a Friends group, we are an example of volunteers but we can only fit in limited amounts of outreach work and feel that Government should not overly rely on such enthusiasm when developing a national strategy to maximise the benefits of local rail services. Adequate sustained funding and other resources must be found to support a successful strategy.

Moving on to the 4 Themes as set out in the draft strategy,

1 Connecting People to Places

2 Supporting Communities, Diversity and Inclusion

3 Supporting Local and Regional Economies

4 Suggesting Innovative Ways (to improve the way the railway works)

Whilst these are laudable ambitions, they need to be translated to objectives which are SMART. They also need to be resourced and you should give consideration as to how these can be measured both at a local and national level to demonstrate the effectiveness of any strategy. As mentioned earlier, the strategy should not rely on the generosity of volunteers or enthusiasts.

Furthermore, the Themes are not mutually exclusive. For example, (3) Supporting Local and Regional Economies, will not be holistically achievable without (1) and (2).

In Paragraph 3.4, it is stated "...assume the existing rail framework remains broadly as it is..." (with "...no new legislation"). Is this a wise assumption when setting policy for the long term and given the present concerns and changes recently announced by the Secretary of State?

Turning now to the 12 Questions, we offer our thoughts below

Questions 1a and 1b

As well as being gateways and a resource for local communities, stations are interchanges and should be developed as such. They should be included in local walking and cycling strategies and plans. Their role as a 'hub' for the locality is often under-utilised particularly for cycling activity. More needs to be done in promoting more sustainable access to and from stations through libraries, schools/colleges, businesses and community centres/organisations.

Question 2

CRPs/Friends groups should engage on a regular basis with local Councils and regional bodies and vice versa.

Rail operators and station managers need to be more responsive.

The majority of non-regular rail users (and indeed some regular users) do not understand the complexities of the current operational structures or ticketing arrangements/offers. To be truly inclusive, there needs to be a systemic simplification. A recent survey of rail users suggested that 92% feel that the railway would work better if it was reunited in a single organisation. We (at Dore and Totley Station) have currently to consider organisations such as Network Rail and their contractors, passenger service operators Northern, East Midlands Trains and Trans-Pennine Express, the freight operators, Carillion (grounds and buildings maintenance), the snow/ice clearance people, the revenue protection contractor etc.

Question 3

In our experience, most of the current 'grassroots' involvement are white, male, retired rail enthusiasts. There needs to be much more effort aimed at involving a broader spectrum particularly from ethnic minority groups and amongst the young.

Question 4a and 4b

Our response to Q3 above applies equally here. Also, there are links to the recently published DfT Draft Transport Accessibility Action Plan Consultation. 'People with disabilities' is a very large cohort and covers a wide range of impairments both mental and physical.

Question 5

See response to Q4

Question 6

Although not denying the importance of 'national' rail to regional economic development, it is important to remember that railways are two way streets that as well as taking people out also bring people in to assist local communities in retaining and developing their local economies.

It is difficult, under the current operational and organisational arrangements and structures, with their risk aversion and 'health and safety' constraints (see also answer to Q2), to offer firm proposals for how community rail could promote, for example, social enterprise development. However, one possibility is that those dealing with 'community service' sentences via the Courts could become more involved in rail-related work.

Question 7

We welcome the implication in the consultation that Network Rail and others work more closely with CRPs/Friends groups to discuss how surplus assets can be put to best use for the local community. We cannot raise the necessary resources to deal with matters like this. Even if we could, it would not be appropriate. We remain willing to offer any local expertise and knowledge that we have but steady and sustained investment is necessary to return redundant and derelict areas to more 'profitable' use.

We feel there must be numerous example across the country but we offer one from local experience. At our station, prior to the rationalisations in the late 1960/70s, there were 4 lines with 4 platforms, 2 on the Midland Main Line and 2 on the then dual Hope Valley Line. By the early 1990s. this was reduced to a single track with one platform serving both west and eastbound trains. As well as removing this significant capacity constraint on trans-Pennine movements, there is ample opportunity (and land) to develop improved facilities and services. Volunteers and local communities can only do so much: vision and resources are needed from Government if we are to achieve the espoused objectives of the Community Rail consultation document.

Question 8

As a Friends group, we feel this issue is best left to the individual CRPs. There is a plethora of funding sources/opportunities which require significant work to access with no guarantee of a successful

outcome. Processes are tortuous. As an example, many months ago we (FoDaTS) sought funding to 'kick start' an investigation into a design and budget estimate for a canopy at Dore and Totley Station since, although we know what is desirable, we have not the detailed structural or architectural knowledge to determine what is achievable. On advice, we put in some considerable effort and applied to Northern's Seed Corn Fund as our requirements seemed to fit with their desire to get projects off the ground (pardon the pun). After many months of deliberation, the matter was referred to the regional CommReg group (we're still not sure what remit this group has) who, although supporting the project, did not consider that this was the way it should be funded and referred it back to Northern to consider "in-house". We now await further developments and people are still getting wet.

Question 9

Some of our comments to Q8 apply to this question and we again feel this would, in the main, be best left to CRPs.

The current regulations and restrictions will make it very hard for community rail activity to become 'entrepreneurial'. Indeed, it is questionable whether being more entrepreneurial should be one of the main objectives of CRPs. Why should a Partnership be a business taking risks for a profit (one of the dictionary definitions of entrepreneur)?

Question 10

We are very uneasy about the idea of designation and departure from national standards. National standards have been developed for a reason. Such departures would have to be carefully looked at, especially from a safety point of view and may also further fragment an already fragmented national rail system.

Question 11

Friends groups should engage with all development proposals likely to have an impact on their stations and indeed should be consulted on all planning applications which may affect the environment and travel patterns in and around the facility.

CRPs should have a role in the development and implementation of regional transport and planning strategies, for example the developing proposals from Transport for the North.

In conclusion, many words can be written about the role of Community Rail affecting different parts of the country with differing requirements. We strongly believe that Community Rail is a very important, but not the only, facet of local rail services and have tried to structure our response by concentrating on what we, as a Friends group, feel are the key issues for our station. At the broadest level, these are Improved Services and Facilities, Community Involvement and Development, Sustainable Mobility, Health, Inclusion and Well-being.