

Theresa Villiers, Minister of State, Final
Community Rail Seminar - 4th March 2011
Community Rail & the Big Society

Thank you for that introduction and warm welcome.

As the Rail Minister, and as a rail passenger, I'm an enthusiastic supporter of Community Rail so it's a real pleasure to be here with you today.

We've heard a lot about the Big Society in the media over recent weeks.

Well you all hear will know that well before David Cameron started talking about the concept ... community rail volunteers up and down the country were demonstrating all the values that lie right at the heart of the Prime Minister's big idea.

In fact it's estimated that community rail volunteers contribute well over a million hours of work every year ... possibly bringing as much as £27m in added value to the railway.

The community rail concept has managed to harness two endearing characteristics of the English psyche.

The first is a willingness to 'get involved' ...

... to volunteer ... and all that generally entails ...

... like sitting on committees ... organising fundraisers ... delivering leaflets.

Edmund Burke called them "little platoons" and any MP knows hundreds of these groups from our constituency work, full of people wanting to give something back ... to make a difference.

Our society and culture is immeasurably enriched by their contribution.

But the second characteristic that community rail capitalises on so successfully is our deep seated affection for the railways.

There's no doubt in my mind that railways enjoy a special place in the hearts of people of this country.

The size of my ministerial post bag is a testament to that truth.

And to be honest, as rail minister, it's easy to get weighed down with difficult decisions on the Spending review or billion pound Crossrail contracts or the complexities of the West Coast franchise

... and all the rest of the daily demands ministerial life.

So it is incredibly refreshing to get away from all that and spend some time on the front line visiting a community rail partnership to meet volunteers, local councillors and rail professionals ...

... all working together and all brimming with enthusiasm for making their local railway a success.

These projects really are a text book example of the kind of initiative the Prime Minister wants to foster with his Big Society concept.

They're win-win in so many ways.

The volunteers benefit because they have a real say in how their local railway is run and the knowledge that they making a difference to their community.

Passengers can benefit with better services and often a much improved station environment.

The train operators benefit because they have a small army of volunteers working to attract customers to the railways.

The Government benefits because getting more people on these lightly used local lines can help lighten the subsidy burden and relieve pressure on our congested roads.

Economic backdrop and McNulty

But community rail is also delivering another aspect of the Prime Minister's Big Society ambition. He believes that unlocking local participation in delivery of public services will help generate new ideas and innovation.

Take the Harrington Hump for example.

Yes you did hear that correctly!

Named after the station where it was first tested ... this is a glass reinforced plastic hump that reduces the gap between the train and the platform.

But it does so at around a tenth of the cost of rebuilding the platform.

It came about through partnership working between the local authority, the rail industry and Copeland Rail User Group ...

... and went from conception to operation in less than 12 months.

Together they delivered an affordable solution to a problem raised at grass roots.

A second telling example is provided by the St Alban's Abbey Line.

The DfT has been working closely with Hertfordshire County Council to take forward a proposal to convert the Abbey Line from heavy to light rail operation.

For many years ... this line has enjoyed strong and enthusiastic community rail support.

And the recent DfT consultation demonstrated real enthusiasm for a switch to light rail with a more frequent service.

There is much work still to do ... and a number of issues to be resolved (no least finding a suitable operator) ...

... but the early signs are positive.

Local ideas and local control look like they have the potential to provide a better service for the same cost.

These two examples shows what a different mindset can achieve.

It's the "fresh ideas and thinking differently" approach which I see as a key ingredient in the success of community rail partnerships ...

... just as they are an important component of David Cameron's Big Society.

And of course, in the current economic climate, ensuring value for money matters more than ever.

Let's not forget that this Government inherited a fiscal crisis... with higher borrowing levels than at any time in British peacetime history.

Sitting back and ignoring the deficit would have left us paying £70 billion a year in interest payments alone by the end of this Parliament.

That's more than the combined figure we spend in policing our streets and defending our country.

So from our first days in office, through our Emergency Budget and the Spending Review ... we've been taking the difficult decisions needed to control spending and put our public finances on the path to recovery.

Returning to fiscal discipline is vital if we are to get this country back on its feet again and deliver the economic stability we need for jobs and growth.

Tackling the deficit may be painful but the consequences of not doing so are far worse ... namely spiralling interest rates and the risk of an Irish-style budget crisis.

But George Osborne has also recognised how crucial it is that we modernise our transport infrastructure to make it an engine of recovery and a gateway to a better quality of life.

And that's why ... despite the crisis .. he has placed a priority on transport projects...

... committing more than £30 billion of capital investment over the next four years

... including a programme of rail improvements that is probably bigger than anything in modern history.

But the fact is that the cost of running the railways has escalated dramatically over recent years.

If we're going to continue to deliver improved services and additional capacity ... the cost of running the railways simply has to come down.

For the sake of both taxpayers and farepayers ... it's imperative that we achieve that goal.

And that's why the McNulty Review is so important.

Sir Roy's recent interim report concluded that there is scope to reduce industry costs by up to a billion per year without reducing services.

But if we're going to achieve that goal we need to think differently.

The community rail sector has amply demonstrated its ability to do that.

Over the years to come ... I'm confident the ideas, innovation and enthusiasm generated by community rail partnerships around the country will provide invaluable input into this great challenge for our railways.

Examples of CRP activities around the country

There are so many examples around the country of that kind of innovation and success from community rail that I was hard pressed to narrow down the examples to fit the time available. I should certainly mention the Severn Beach Line which I had the pleasure of visiting this morning. I learned today that reported crime has fallen by 53% since Partnership started its Severnside Community Stations Programme in 2007.

That's a remarkable success story.

Much of the heavy station renovation work is undertaken by offenders on community sentences. This is then followed up by encouraging local schools to look after the station and provide station artwork.

The end result is more welcoming and safer stations which are better respected and less prone to vandalism.

At Clifton Down I saw how school artwork has been used as a contemporary and eye-catching way to brighten up the station.

The local council has also funded extra train services on the line....while First Great Western has invested in new customer information screens.

Passenger numbers have more than doubled in the last five years.

And the Community Rail Partnership has played a key role in co-ordinating the joint working which has delivered these achievements.

Another example is provided by Three Rivers in Southampton which I visited a few weeks ago. I could tell that the partnership were effective in bringing different organisations to work together when I was met with reception committee of about 30 people!

I have to say my regional visits seldom trigger that kind of interest!

Like so many CRPs ... Three Rivers has helped increase rail patronage with a host of initiatives including small touches that can make a big difference.....

... like new raised flower beds and planters and a wildflower garden complete with hedgehog boxes.

Changes like these ... not obviously significant individually ... can have a disproportionate impact on the passenger experience.

By improving the look and feel of the station ... you send out the signal that this is an environment which is valued and looked after.

The experience of many CRPs around the country show that that in itself can help deter vandalism ... the converse of the famous 'broken window' experiment that demonstrated the corrosive impact that signs of neglect can have on a neighbourhood.

Funding announcement

I'd like to turn lastly to what I hope is, a welcome announcement.

We all know these are tough times where money is in short supply.

So we need to focus our limited resources on the programmes that generate the best value for money.

I'm therefore delighted to confirm that the DfT has reached a three year financial settlement with the Association of Community Rail Partnerships.

As well securing the organisation's core funding right through to 2014 ... this settlement will enable ACORP to double the pot of money it sets aside for its small schemes grant programme.

I understand this means that ACORP will also be able to extend its bursary initiative to include free places for station adopters and partnership officers working on non-designated routes.

I'm also pleased to be able to tell you that the Government will continue to support rail partnerships operating on designated routes through the Designated Community Rail Development Fund.

Funding for the scheme will be increased to a record £100,000 to support your projects in the 2011/12 financial year ... and it will be open to new bids on 1st April 2011.

So in conclusion ... I have to say that back in the dark days under the last Government when the world banking system was in meltdown and the public finances were spiralling out of control ...

... I never thought I would be standing at a podium three years later to announce continued funding for community rail.

Nor did I think for a moment that this would come in the wake of confirmation of a massive programme of rail improvement and expansion.

But there can be no doubt whatsoever that community rail is a genuine transport success story...
... a model for what self empowerment and community involvement can deliver.

Partnership after partnership ... project after project ... and line after line ... you are making a real difference to your communities ... and you are making life better for your fellow citizens.

For that I applaud you and thank you.

And I wish you continuing success in the work that you do.

Thank you.

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