



Rail Safety & Standards Board

Research Programme

Operations

Good practice in station adoption schemes

Good practice guide - Groups



Good Practice in Station Adoption – Groups

What is third party adoption

Third party adoption is the involvement of one or more individuals or organisations from outside the railway industry in the management and/or operation of a station. Adoption is most common in Britain among small and medium-sized stations. Adoption is most common at unstaffed stations, although many staffed stations have adopters too. It must be remembered that many ‘staffed’ stations are only manned for part of the time, for example only for a single morning or daytime shift, with no staff present in the evenings or for most or all of the weekend. There are three main types of third party adoption:

- Level 1: adoption by one or more individuals tasked with monitoring and reporting to the station operator on faults and issues requiring attention. This is sometimes known as “eyes and ears” adoption.
- Level 2: adoption by a group, such as a station or route Friends Group, a local organisation with wider interests such as a community body or a school, or the local branch of a national organisation such as Women’s Institute or the National Trust, which assumes responsibility for one or more aspects of station operation, such as gardening, operation of a refreshment or other retail facility (e.g. ticket office, information office or sales kiosk).
- Level 3: commercial sponsorship, usually by a local business (e.g. manufacturer, employer or retailer), with the objective of bringing mutual benefit to the sponsor (increased footfall, sales generation, good public relations) and the railway.

A further category, which often takes place as part of an adoption scheme, is the occupation of station accommodation by tenants. At smaller stations, tenants often rent premises that are no longer needed for railway use; former booking offices, staff accommodation and waiting rooms, for example. By convention, we do not consider the extensive presence of tenants on large stations, such as bookshops, fast food outlets and other forms of retailing, to be ‘adoptions’, although they do clearly help in the same way as an adoption scheme to bring business to a station and to make it a lively place to be.

Explanation of group adoption

Group adoption of a station usually comes about when a local group, authority, organisation or business becomes interested in enhancing the station’s image, attractiveness, safety, security or environment. Groups may be either specially set up for the single purpose of working at a local station, or adoption may be by expansion of the sphere of interest of an existing body. Generally, group adoption takes place entirely or predominantly for altruistic reasons and group members work at the station in an unpaid, voluntary capacity. In some instances, however, organisational and possible also managerial support may be available from a funded organisation as was the case with the National Trust at Bodmin Parkway.

A special case is where a station is managed, possibly including paid staffing, by a local authority. This sometimes occurs where a station or line is re-opened, or a station is rebuilt with local authority support. This form of adoption is a particular feature in Lancashire, where the ticket offices at several stations are staffed by local authority employees. Examples include Carnforth, Clitheroe and Burscough Bridge.

The role of tenants

There are two fundamental categories of tenant; those who just rent accommodation at a station, but whose business has no connection with the railway; and those whose business has a mutually beneficial synergy with the railway. Both kinds of tenant benefit the railway in the form of payment of rents, often occupying redundant premises no longer required by the railway. Non rail-related tenancies help to ensure that buildings are kept in good condition and afford a human presence where – especially at unstaffed stations – there would otherwise be none. Examples of such tenancies include residential, offices, workshops, non rail-related retailing, medical/social services and restaurants. A disadvantage of non rail-related tenancies may be where there is a conflict of interest between the tenant's and the railway's needs, for example competing pressure for the use of station car parks.

Uses of station buildings are many and varied, including tenancies that have no synergy with the passenger railway (e.g. an IT firm's offices at Attleborough; a builder's formerly at Brandon) and many former station houses now in private residential use (e.g. at several stations on the Tyne Valley line). Often – and preferably – station tenancies are held by occupants whose businesses benefit, and benefit from, the railway.

Where a restaurant occupies former railway accommodation, mutually beneficial synergies may be sought, as exemplified by the combined rail and dining packages offered at the Indian restaurant at Corbridge station, Northumberland. A more obvious synergy is provided where a tenant runs a specifically 'station' catering establishment, such as the tea room at Crediton, Devon station. Examples of non-commercial tenancies that benefit the railway are the location of tourist information bureaux at stations, for example at Carnforth and Clitheroe, Lancashire and Haltwhistle, Northumberland. There are clear mutual benefits from the presence of a taxi office at a railway station, as at Hexham and Morpeth in Northumberland and at Warwick.

Whether or not there are synergies with the railway business, a distinction needs also to be made between tenants who just operate their own businesses and those that play a managerial role at the station too. A prime example of the latter is Wymondham, Norfolk, where the station tenant runs three businesses (restaurant, railway museum and piano workshop), has made part of his tenanted premises available to the train operator for use as a ticket office, and looks after the station.

At Bridlington, East Yorkshire, the station has a variety of tenants, including the mental health charity MIND, which has transformed the former parcels office into an arts centre, and the operators of the buffet and bar, who decorate the concourse with award-winning

floral displays each summer. The former 'gents' toilet is occupied by the local model railway society.

Community uses for redundant railway buildings or surplus space in existing buildings

Like most other forms of tenancy at stations, community uses encourage increased human presence in and around the station, increase awareness of the railway among local residents and contribute to the upkeep and retention in good condition of accommodation no longer needed for operational purposes by the railway. A good example is the Healthy Living centre at Southminster station, Essex, which also houses the local Community Rail Partnership.

Objectives of Station Adoption by Third Parties

Targets

A key target is to improve the ambience of the station and its environs, thereby making it safer, more secure and more attractive and encouraging more people to use it.

Benefits to the train operator

The train operator achieves increased business and reduced costs of station management and operation. The operator is able to target maintenance and repair resources when and where they are needed, rather than having to devote scarce resources to inspections in case action is required.

To the community

The community gains a station that is more attractive to current and potential users, and even to members of the local community who do not use it. It will be better cared for, safer and more secure, and less likely to become vandalised or be used by undesirable elements in the community. Adoption may bring the local station a higher profile within the community, especially where adoption is by a group such as Station or Line Friends.

Benefits to rail users

Rail users find the station more pleasant to use; cleaner, free from wanton damage, with repairs and maintenance carried out in a timely manner. Adoption under a Group scheme, such as by Station Friends or by a tenant, may result in a human presence at what would otherwise be an unmanned station. This may just offer reassurance, or afford a specific service such as the provision of an information point, a community facility or catering establishment.

Benefits to volunteers

Volunteers obtain the personal satisfaction of providing a real benefit to their community. They may also gain a more specific benefit, such as the ability to use their local station in greater security and safety.

Station adoption and Community Railways

Station adoption often takes place on 'Community' lines, although the remit of Community Rail Partnerships is wider than just the adoption of stations (e.g. including elements of marketing, the operation of schemes such as guided walks, and mounting events such as galas and music trains). It is very helpful to a Community Rail Partnership for stations on the line to have adopters, as there are mutual benefits in the assurance of quality, security, safety and in keeping stations in a good state of repair. Volunteers from Friends of the Settle Carlisle Line tend the gardens and look after station welfare at several stations along the route and the group has shops at two stations, Appleby and Settle.

It is not a prerequisite of station adoption that the line should be part of a Community Rail scheme. This may, for example, enable stations on main lines or other routes which do not qualify for Community Rail designation, to be adopted.

Where stations on Community Rail lines are adopted under Level 1 fault monitoring and reporting schemes, it is important that close liaison is maintained between the Partnership and adopters, to ensure mutual respect and collaboration, and that duplication of effort is avoided.

Setting up a group adoption scheme

It is generally considered that group adoption schemes function best when they arise spontaneously from within the community; and, conversely, that any attempt to 'impose' a group on a line is unlikely to succeed.

Who can form an adoption group

Anyone can form a group. It may arise from rail passengers, persons with other 'amenity' interests such as transport, environmental, community, heritage or social matters. Local businesses or their representative bodies could become involved, or organisations with wider interests such as a local branch of the National Trust, Britain in Bloom or the Women's Institute.

Getting started – forming an adoption group

Often there will be some underlying catalyst for a group to be established in a particular location at a particular time; maybe a local concern (e.g. a waiting room kept locked out of use, the station's ambience or condition or misuse such as the station attracting loiterers); or a positive reasons such as a desire to capitalise on the railway's heritage (e.g. buildings of architectural merit, identification of the potential for creating attractive gardens, to exploit the locality's tourism, or simply a belief that more people should be attracted to rail travel).

A group will need to have a good leader, probably in possession of multiple skills: someone who is capable of 'getting their hands dirty', of motivating others, with a good imagination, and able to get on with people from different walks of life: rail management

and staff, volunteers, local politicians, business people, the local media and the local community.

Learning from the experience of others

There are already numerous station adoption groups and Community Rail Partnerships, spread throughout Britain. As the adoption is to be of premises operated by a Train Operating Company (TOC), contact must immediately be made with the relevant management of the TOC, to ascertain their attitude to the concept of adoption and their intentions for the station/s concerned; e.g. what if any problems are known, whether the TOC has any development plans for the station, whether any other bodies are already involved with it. If the station is on a Community Rail Partnership line, the Partnership must be contacted, to establish its policies for the station. To gain the benefit of experience from around the country, contact with the Association of Community Rail Partnerships (ACoRP) is strongly recommended.

Deciding the scope of activities to be undertaken

The scope of activities to be carried out will depend in combination of the opportunities and needs presented by the station; and also on the size, resources and capabilities of the adopting group. A small group may prefer, at least initially, to contain its activities to a narrow range of tasks, such as gardening. Taking on more ambitious tasks, such as anything requiring extensive staff presence (e.g. running a café or manning an information point) will require careful planning to ensure that the activity can be sustained in the long term.

Whatever activity it is proposed to undertake must be agreed with the TOC and with Network Rail, as owners of the infrastructure (and possibly landlord of part of the station premises).

Does the group need a constitution?

It is helpful for a group to have a constitution, to ensure that it operates in a business-like manner, that every member knows what the group stands for and where the boundaries of its activities and relationships lie. Possessing a constitution will help avoid disputes, both internally and externally. It will make the handover of responsibilities between succeeding officers of the group a smooth and simple process. The constitution should set out procedures such as voting rights and methods, in connection with group policy development and approval

Practicalities (forming a committee, setting responsibilities, setting up a bank account)

A committee needs a Chairman, Secretary and a Treasurer, plus other officers as appropriate if the group is big enough to warrant this. Responsibilities are as follows:

- **Chairman:** in overall charge of managing the committee and setting out policies for approval by the group, chairing meetings and heading external relations (e.g. with the TOC and Network Rail).

- **Secretary:** to assist the chairman (e.g. by writing and distributing agendas, minutes of meetings).
- **Treasurer:** financial administration, including collection and banking of subscriptions and any other income, and in connection with expenditure. Preparation and presentation of accounts.

It is common practice for a group to have its own bank account, unless amounts of money to be handled and numbers of transactions are too small for this to be worthwhile. It is recommended that groups 'shop around' to find the bank and type of account that gives the best deal for voluntary, not for profit group accounts:

- **Commercial officer:** where a group is involved in any kind of commercial trading, the establishment of a bank account and maintenance of full trading accounts are essential. A group involved in trading of any kind may wish to appoint a committee member with specific responsibility for commercial and trading activities.
- **Publicity and Public Relations officer:** in order to keep the group's profile high with the local community and media, and nationally through the railway press and among organisations such as ACoRP.

The cost of setting up a group adoption scheme

The financial cost of setting up a group adoption scheme can be very small, if the main inputs are of volunteers' time (e.g. limited to small amounts of telephone business, correspondence and the circulation of papers). This is minimised if communication is wholly or mainly by email.

If a group is involved in any form of trading, such as catering, sales stands or ticket sales, extended costs of premises rental, stock acquisition and storage, security and operational expenditure will be incurred. Costs will include wages if any paid staff are employed, and managerial and administrative costs will be incurred in connection with trading activities.

Contacting the TOC to agree the scope of activity

Before setting up an adoption group it will be essential to contact the Train Operating Company (TOC) responsible for the station you wish to adopt, to discuss with them their policies for station adoption and to agree upon the activities the group will carry out. Each TOC generally has an officer responsible for adoption matters, who may be based at the company's headquarters, perhaps in a commercial department, or may be locally based. Volunteers working at stations will be expected to agree terms and conditions with the TOC (e.g. regarding health and safety, drugs and alcohol policies). It may also be appropriate, through the TOC, similarly to inform Network Rail, as head landlord of station premises, and to ensure compliance by volunteers with any requirements Network Rail may have (e.g. concerning access to parts of the station under its control).

Role of trade unions: It may also be prudent to make the relevant trade unions aware of the adoption group's activities, to ensure that staff at stations, in maintenance teams and

on trains are aware when and where voluntary activity will be taking place. The TOC would normally take responsibility for any such contacts.

Use of equipment: Agreement must be reached with the TOC regarding any of their equipment volunteers may be allowed to use. This could include gardening equipment, accommodation and facilities, although normally volunteers' work would be limited to areas of the station to which the public have access. The TOC will advise if there is a need to agree any particular activity with Network Rail or another third party.

Contacting the BTP

It is advisable for the existence of an adoption group to be known to the local British Transport Police and for volunteers working at stations to know how to contact the BTP urgently should the need arise. Northern Rail's guidance for adopters, for example, advises adopters how to report matters such as a crime, graffiti, or antisocial behaviour using BTP's national free phone number.

Contacting Local Authorities

An adoption group should make the relevant local authority/ies aware of its presence, as local authorities have a role in transport planning, co-ordination and funding. Other departments of an authority may also become interested, for example, in the potential for community use of redundant station premises. It may be possible to secure an authority's collaboration or assistance in achieving the group's aims.

Using the media

The local broadcast and printed media can be very helpful in publicising an adoption group and in helping it achieve its aims. Such contact should be developed and maintained at every opportunity.

Contact may either be informal, and/or through the issue of press releases. Reliance on informal contact does have the risk of inaccurate reporting.

Is an action plan or a business plan necessary?

It is useful for all concerned – volunteers, group management/committee, TOC and local Network Rail officers – to know what the adoption group has set out to do and for there to be plans to ensure they are carried out to the planned timescale and standard.

Running a group adoption scheme

For a scheme to work efficiently and effectively it is necessary that volunteers work to agreed schedules and that agreed tasks are carried out.

Working rotas for volunteers

It will therefore be necessary for rotas to be prepared, setting out who will be working when and what tasks they are to undertake. Volunteers should be required to commit themselves to working at specified times, whether at regular intervals or on an 'as available' basis. The important criterion is for agreed times to be adhered to and tasks carried out. It may be necessary to inform the TOC of the times volunteers will be present at the station, their names and what tasks they will be working on. Most 'Friends' groups specify a particular day each week or month for working parties to visit their adopted stations.

The importance of duty rotas is greatest if the group has public duties such as trading or information provision, where continuous manning of counters, sales and information points, cafes (food preparation, sales, clearing and cleaning) is essential.

Recruiting and training new volunteers

Volunteers may be substantially self-recruiting, from among people with an interest in working at the station. Nevertheless, it may also be necessary to inform and encourage new and additional volunteers, and to ensure that a sufficiently large and permanent pool of labour is available to undertake the duties to which the group has committed itself.

Training requirements will include that needed to undertake a job satisfactorily; but also essential training to meet statutory and TOC requirements in areas such as hygiene, health and safety; and drugs and alcohol.

Training for particular tasks will include an element of selection to ensure that volunteers are competent in the appropriate areas: knowing which plants are 'weeds' and how to plant new plants; competence to operate a cash till, and how to deal with customers, for example.

Using equipment on rail property

Any equipment used on or near railway premises must be used in a correct and safe manner, e.g. to avoid injury to the user and to others (other volunteers, passengers, rail staff) – correct methods of lifting heavy equipment, avoiding trip hazards by ensuring equipment is not left lying around when not in use.

Only equipment which the volunteer has permission and is competent to use should be used. The equipment to be used is a matter for discussion and agreement with the local station manager.

Maintaining local interest

A successful station adoption group will regularly engage in activities that ensure its name is prominent in the local community. This is an important role for a Publicity and Public Relations officer. Every opportunity must be taken to bring the group and its activities into the public eye, (e.g. by staging and participating in events, developing contact with other local groups and institutions, clubs and societies including branches of amenity societies, schools, libraries, social and religious groups).

Running special events

A good way to start running special events, especially for those with no previous experience, is to take part in events mounted by other bodies, such as local authority community events, ACoRP Community Rail days, taking stalls at local fetes and participating in local charity events.

Once experience has been obtained, a group may wish to run its own events, examples of which might include events at stations, walks from stations, or even the operation of a special excursion by coach or train. The latter, especially, would involve a substantial financial commitment and risk, and is not an event to be undertaken without meticulous planning and comprehensive marketing. If an event is to be run at a station, the full support of the TOC must be obtained; and it should be noted that the space available for a public event to be held safely at an operational railway station may be very limited.

Opinion surveys – why and how

- An opinion survey might be carried out to inform a group (and the local TOC) as to the most important factors affecting customers' perceptions of their local station and train service. It will be important for the purpose of the intended survey to be determined before going ahead with it.
- A survey may be carried out either by asking respondents questions face to face, or by giving them a questionnaire to fill in. The number of questions should be limited to how many can be answered in the time available, e.g. as passengers wait for a train. Questions should be unbiased (i.e. not 'lead' to a particular answer).

Feedback

- The number of survey forms distributed or passengers questioned must be sufficiently large for a representative set of answers to be obtained. Someone in the group will need the competence to analyse the responses, to draw conclusions from it, and to suggest follow-up action.
- Feedback from current and potential users may also be gained informally (e.g. by soliciting their opinions; or through obtaining news coverage and asking for responses in the local media).

Funding

Funding may be raised through running and participating in events, as discussed above. It may also be generated through trading activities such as catering or running an information/book stand at the station. Clearly, great care must be taken in the operation of a trading activity that the activity is profitable, as an unprofitable activity would be a drain on resources rather than a generator of income. In any trading activity, competent stock control is vital, especially where the stock is perishable, as in a catering outlet.

Agreeing a membership subscription

Charging a small membership fee is an important way to obtain serious commitment from members/volunteers, but the level of the subscription should not be so large as to deter potential volunteers. If consideration is given to having variable subscription levels (e.g. a reduction for retired members) the impact on income needs to be taken into account, especially if the proportion of retired members is expected to be high.

It may be possible to assist the group's cash flow by offering long term membership (e.g. for life instead of a modest annual subscription).

Securing contributions in kind

Many adoption groups benefit from contributions in kind by the TOC operating the station (e.g. gardening tools, planters, plants). Local authorities and potential sponsors, such as local companies, may also be prepared to make contributions in kind or in cash in return for acknowledgement or publicity for their involvement.

Securing external funding

In addition to sources referred to above, financial contributions may be sought from local regeneration bodies, charitable foundations and business bodies.

The key to obtaining support in kind or in cash is to be proactive and innovative. Keep in touch with any potential benefactor, obtain their interest and support in principle, development and maintain good relations with them, offer mutual benefits such as displaying their publicity and offering them space at any events the group runs.

Relationship to Local Transport Plans and the development planning framework

It is in the interest of a station adoption group for the station to be as well used as possible. Groups should therefore seek every opportunity to contribute to consultation on Local Transport Plans and to make their views known in connection with development proposals. Any proposals that are likely to strengthen the station's role in the local community should generally be supported, whether by improving access to the station, improving its built environment, or increasing residential or retailing activity close to the station. It should be noted that proposed legislation may result in changes to the transport planning process in England.

The role of tenants at stations

Tenants can play an important role in making the station important for the local community; by increasing human ‘footfall’ at and around the station, by strengthening the area’s economy and by encouraging environmental improvements around the station.

Adding to the human presence during working hours as a minimum

Tenants occupying station buildings that would otherwise be redundant (and either stand empty or be demolished) can play an important role in ensuring that the premises are kept in good repair and that the area benefits from human activity throughout the working day. Tenants whose business attracts human activity, which may include social activities such as health centres or clinics, may be appropriate tenants for this reason. So are tenants whose business is related to that of the railway, such as running a café or restaurant, whose customers will include both railway passengers and non users (but with potential to become users).

Potential for a pro-active role

A tenant may actively collaborate with the railway, for example where a tourist office (Haltwhistle, Carnforth) or travel agency (St. Ives, Chester-le-Street) is located at the station. Other businesses that actively encourage people to come to the station are also to be welcomed, such as the transport museum at Wymondham and art gallery at Clitheroe.

Facilities for rail and non-rail users (e.g. cafés, kiosks, convenience stores)

- Most cafés and restaurants at stations are operated by tenants, but some are run by adoption groups or have close links to station adopters (e.g. Crediton, Wymondham).
- The provision of convenience stores at petrol stations has become a major feature of society, but the number at rail stations is smaller. There is potential to increase the number of convenience stores at stations, especially where a station is well sited for the attraction of non rail customers as well as those using the train.

Re-using redundant rail property

Why

Empty property soon decays and becomes unsightly; and no one has a strong interest in maintaining it in good condition. There are many railway stations with attractive premises that are capable of being put to alternative use when no longer needed for their original purpose.

For what uses

A purpose that has some synergy with the railway, i.e. brings to the station people who use or might use the train, is in principle to be preferred over a tenancy that does not significantly increase human activity at the station, such as general industrial or commercial use. Network Rail is required to obtain a commercial rent where possible. If a commercial tenant cannot be found, Network Rail is prepared to let empty properties at a low rent for a community or non-profit-making purpose, in preference to leaving them empty.

Overcoming institutional barriers

It is preferable for a tenancy not to be linked to the duration of the TOCs franchise. The standard 25 year lease negotiated by ACoRP with Network Rail and being used by tenants under the ACoRP / Central Trains Central Stations project helps by overcoming the barrier imposed by the short length of rail passenger franchises.

Rail Safety and Standards Board Evergreen House 160 Euston Road London NW1 2DX
Reception Telephone +44 (0)20 7904 7777 Facsimile +44 (0)20 7904 7791
www.rssb.co.uk

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