

Haslemere Community Rail Partnership Report September 2017

Introduction and purpose

Haslemere Community Rail Partnership was established in October 2015 with the purpose of promoting Haslemere and its surrounding countryside, to promote rail travel to the town as a more sustainable travel mode and to improve the station and forecourt environment.

It grew out of a desire by the local community to work with the local train operator, South West Trains, on the plans for a new station car park and improvements to the station forecourt. The intent was to transform the zone around the station into a more attractive and safer environment for all users. At the same time, an Information Hub was created in vacant retail premises on the station forecourt, so that local organisations could promote the town of Haslemere, local events and the South Downs National Park.

Primary Aims and Objectives

- To use Haslemere train station as the stimulus to promote Haslemere town with its independent shops and businesses, rich arts and crafts heritage and wide range of nationally renowned festivals and events.
- To promote Haslemere train station as a 'gateway' to the South Downs National Park.
- To provide a ground-breaking comprehensive visitor information service for rail travellers
 - via the establishment of a community run Information Hub at the train station
- To promote more sustainable train travel for visitors and local residents
 - In context of:
 - over 1.3 million passenger journeys a year
 - heavy proportion commuting to work, school and college
 - restricted parking capacity
 - Seeking to improve intermodal connections between train, walking, cycling and public transport
- To improve the station and its forecourt
 - facilities
 - aesthetics
 - information for travellers
- To optimise the station as Haslemere's main transport hub and as the mid-point between two halves of the town
- To bring together a wide range of partners to realise the HCRP goals to promote the town, rail travel and the visitor economy.

Engagement with the Community through our Partners

The partner organisations that came together to deliver our aims include:

South West Trains
 Surrey County Council
 Haslemere Town Council
 Haslemere Chamber of Commerce
 South Downs National Park
 The local National Trust
 Haslemere Vision
 Haslemere Society
 Haslemere Events

Haslemere Festival
 Haslemere Museum, including Visitor Information Centre
 Station House Hotel
 Haslemere NADFAS - Arts and Crafts Society (recently proposed member)

Each partner has made either a financial contribution to the partnership, or a contribution in kind. Match funding has been provided by SWT. A steering committee comprising one member from each partner has been formed, chaired by Councillor Nikki Barton. Meetings have been held every 2-3 months to which all partners have been invited. The wide range of partners means we cover a large proportion of the community groups that are active in Haslemere.

Engagement with the community through special events

A number of events and initiatives have been a means of engaging with the local and wider community. A few examples include:

- Carol singing
- Information day for travellers in advance of major forecourt works
- Various local events organised by community groups have been promoted at the Information Hub (e.g. Haslemere Fringe events, Food Festival, Walkers Are Welcome Festival, etc.)
- Community Rail in the City, May 2017- attended the promotion event at Waterloo station

Actions taken so far to achieve HCRP's goals

The information Hub was an early win, with local professionals and volunteers turning the disused shop into a vibrant area, which is able to display a vast amount of information about the town, the surrounding area and local organisations. We are proud to display Haslemere as the Gateway to the South Downs. The shop is open for several hours, five days a week, including weekends, providing visitors to Haslemere as well as local residents, with information about the town, local organisations and events taking place. Since its inception the shop has been used to promote local events, and is offered to any community group that wishes to do this.

Another of our early successes involved working with Surrey County Council (SCC) to commission consultants to carry out a survey and develop a station travel plan, built on a deep understanding of travel patterns in and around the station. This work was used to help introduce changes to the initial plans submitted by SWT for the expansion to the station car park and for reconfiguration of the station forecourt. It was debated at an open Town Meeting at which local rail users and residents were given an opportunity to have their say on the future.

HCRP organised an information day for train travellers to both share the plans for the station works, and warn of major disruption with the closure of the main car park during the works. The SCC TravelSmart team was based in the station shop to provide advice on alternative ways of accessing the station, together with a full display of maps and plans detailing the proposed works. The partnership was proud to be awarded the bronze ACoRP award for services to passengers for this initiative.

To improve the station and forecourt environment the partnership has:

- invested money into the refurbishment of the flowerbeds on the station platforms;

- ensured that a natural screen of native species of shrubs and trees were planted to blend the harsh outlines of a double deck car park into the surrounding environment;
- worked alongside SCC to deliver a new cantilevered bus shelter to keep passengers dry at an adjacent station pick up and drop off point; and
- in partnership with the South Downs National Park, developed a new visitor map to be installed on a totem sign post on the station forecourt; the map will also be printed for distribution at the Information Hub.

Information Hub Funding

The partnership identified that the full potential of the community Information Hub would not be realised without some level of paid coordinator to take responsibility for the shop. The role also includes sourcing, training and supervising volunteers. Consequently, it was agreed, with sufficient funding committed to the partners, to employ a part time manager Antoinette Francis on a 10 hours-a-week, 6 month trial basis until October 9th 2017.

Although the project got off to a slow start due to the forecourt works being severely delayed and access to the shop blocked for an extended period, following completion of the works the benefit of having an employed Information Hub Manager has been extremely positive.

Financial sustainability going forward

HCRP has raised significant funds to support the project to-date from its community partnership, with match funding from SWT. Priorities agreed in new franchise agreement unfortunately pre-dated HCRP's full establishment with the result that HCRP is not included in the list of 8 CRP's with assured funding going forward following the franchise transfer on August 20, 2017 from SWT to South Western Railway. The partnership will be actively exploring all other funding options.

A key issue has been securing an assured lease of the station shop, to enable us to apply to other funding bodies for support. Following considerable frustration at the lack of response, a letter (copy below) was sent to Andrew Mellors, CEO South Western Railway requesting his intervention. We have assurance from Sept 21st, 2017 of a minimum one full year tenancy of the shop premises. While this is very positive, allowing the partnership to plan for next spring and summer the relatively short lease length may make it more difficult for secure charity and community grant funding.

Given the funding issues we have agreed with Antoinette Francis to end her contract from October 9th, with agreement to continually review the situation in the light of the partnership financial position. Linked with this, we have decided to close the shop during the winter months, planning to reopen in the spring. There has been a marked drop in visitor numbers since the beginning of September and low temperatures in the shop mean it is not suitable for volunteers.

The station shop will however continue to provide a shop front window for any community groups wanting to promote events over the winter months - at present the window display promotes the walking festival, and the TV screen rolling video content will be updated regularly. The shop will also be available to any group wanting to use it for community purposes- for example it has been offered to the media team running the pandemic experiment.

HCRP is an active dedicated partnership with the clear ambition to build on our current successes and plans for many future initiatives. Assuming funding can be secured, among other plans HCRP intends to:

- continue to employ a part time volunteer coordinator for the Information Hub - to develop a more comprehensive visitor and travel information offering at the shop, including a greater social media presence. We would like to work with the franchise holder to develop a 'travel ambassador' role for volunteers to work with the station staff to provide greater service to rail passengers;
- produce a guide book of walks and bike rides from Haslemere station, both circular routes and to other stations along the line (including the potential to link up with the E Hants CRP, for example);
- make further improvements to the station forecourt, waiting rooms and platforms - for example window boxes, art displays, herb and wildlife friendly planting;
- upgrade the station shop: new door, glass replacement, heating to allow for winter use, an iPad to enable user-friendly service; and
- promote more sustainable travel to the station to reduce congestion on the station forecourt and pressure on parking in the town (for example, by working to improve integration with local buses; producing maps to show the best cycle and walking routes to access Haslemere station from the town and surrounding villages; using social media to promote events in partnership with SCC TravelSmart team). This would build on the recent Station Travel plan findings- with a subsequent follow up survey to guide future initiatives; and
- use the central location of the station shop in the town to further link Haslemere's many community groups and to increase social capital by promoting local participation in community activities.

Future Strategy

At present HCRP is a stand-alone station initiative- to secure future funding it may be advantageous to join with other stations to the north- Witley ,Milford and Godalming to form a full partnership.

The current franchise agreement includes a switch in 2020 from the current CRP funding to a £20 million Community Innovation Fund, to which Haslemere CRP would apply.

Nikki Barton

Chair, Haslemere Community Rail Partnership

Sept 22, 2017