

The sustainable branch line: how rail can aid regeneration

Written by Paul Salveson, TR&IN

Introduction

The Strategic Rail Authority published its *Strategic Plan*¹ on 14 January. It highlights rail's advantages in promoting regeneration, social inclusion and sustainability and outlines how the government's objectives for growth over the next 10 years can be achieved. The target for the passenger network is 50 per cent growth, and for freight an even bigger 80 per cent increase, with £33.5bn of public funds available.

The plan also addresses labour market issues, with proposals for a Railway Academy to re-build the railway's skills base, and for greater collaboration between train operators and infrastructure providers. So how does that translate into practical developments on the regional network? This paper explores some of the issues raised in the *Strategic Plan* for people involved in local and regional economic development, and focuses on ways in which locally managed rail companies could act as catalysts for sustainable local development.

Community-rail partnerships

Some of the most innovative work in linking railways and regeneration has been done through community-rail partnerships, of which there are over 30 across the UK. Their federal body, the Association of Community-Rail Partnerships², is funded by the Strategic Rail Authority and the government's Countryside Agency.

A community-rail partnership is effectively a linear development agency, using the rail corridor as the base for a wide range of social, economic and cultural activities. This is partly about using the train and connecting bus services to create new opportunities for people living in peripheral areas who don't have access to a car. Many rail partnerships have set up new bus-rail links, and introduced local residents' railcards which can cut the price of local fares by as much as half.



Huddersfield Station: the new trans-Pennine express franchise will improve services across the Pennines

LOCAL

WORK

No 39 February 2002

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Local Work is published by the Centre for Local Economic Strategies, Express Networks, 1 George Leigh Street, Manchester M4 5DL

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Email: info@cles.org.uk
Web: www.cles.org.uk
ISSN: 09503080

The views expressed in *Local Work* are not necessarily those of the Centre for Local Economic Strategies

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Printed by Russell Press, Nottingham

As well as developing transport services, rail partnerships have been instrumental in helping re-focus regeneration initiatives at local transport hubs – particularly railway stations. As a result of the *Beeching Report* of 1963, the British Railways Board closed more than 2,000 stations and about 5,000 miles of railway (about 28 per cent of the total) leaving station buildings to fall derelict or be demolished. Today, many of these buildings are enjoying a new lease of life as community resources, tourist information centres, pubs and cafés. Positive examples can be seen at Betws-y-Coed, Redcar, Clitheroe, Whitby, Moorthorpe, Haltwhistle and elsewhere³.

The contribution of the railways to the national economy is substantial: the rail sector employs 130,000 people and carries over 1.2 million people to work each day. However, a lot more could be done to make rail a bigger player in the *local* economy. In Germany, Sweden, Denmark and The Netherlands, many local railways are managed locally, bringing well-paid, permanent employment to more peripheral areas. In the UK, railways tend to be run centrally, with staff based at large depots in the major cities. While this brings some economies of scale, it means many local railways don't get the sort of management focus, or staff pride, that they enjoy on some continental lines.

Creating a community railway

That could change. The approach favoured by some community-rail partnerships in the UK is 'microfranchising'. The term is used loosely to describe a range of options which bring varying degrees of local control to the operation and management of a local railway. Another term used, which is perhaps even more vague – but more compelling – is the 'community railway'. But what is a community railway? I would argue that it is a railway which meets the needs of the local communities it serves, including residents and visitors. Its staff and management are based within the community, not at a remote depot or

headquarters. Both stations and trains would have a clear local identity, with a high level of community involvement in the care and upkeep of stations. The community railway procures local goods and services, such as catering, office supplies, cleaning and some technical services. Ideally, the community railway would, in a real sense, be 'owned' by the local community, through either a public or private company.

The sustainable branch line



Railway re-opening: the first train to arrive at Syston Station, Leicestershire

If microfranchising is to develop in the UK it would be useful to have a model to which different projects could aspire, while relating closely to local needs and conditions. Local operation of rail services isn't an end in itself – it is a means to provide better services for passengers and have a beneficial impact on the local economy and environment. It should not be seen as a 'cheap' option, but neither should it cost – overall – more than the current centralised operation costs. We need to develop the concept of a 'sustainable branch line' operated by a company with a genuine stake in the local community, offering something new and – dare we say it – *exciting* both to the passenger and the community.

What sort of things would make up the sustainable branch line? In summary, the sustainable branch line is a *corridor* which is based on the railway, providing high quality, community-controlled transport services which are safe, do not

damage the environment, are socially responsible and support a diverse and complementary range of economic activities. Transport staff – including management as well as other personnel – are based in the community, and the transport company is an active ingredient of the local economy, as an employer and purchaser of services and goods.

Here are some features:

- a train service which is run to meet the needs of the local communities along its route, as well as serving the needs of visitors – including evening services, all-year round Sunday operation

- a train service which is accessible and affordable
- feeder bus and taxi services meeting trains at 'key' stations
- good passenger facilities at stations
- well-trained staff who are responsive to passengers' needs
- safe access for cyclists and pedestrians
- good quality information on transport facilities and all other local facilities and activities/attractions for visitors arriving at stations; similar information available on line, and also by phone
- station buildings which are built on sustainable principles, that are welcoming, safe and full of life
- a train service which is managed locally, and supports the local

economy by providing employment and supporting other local businesses

- a train service which offers locally-produced goods for sale on its services, for example, local food and drink, local crafts, guides, etc
- a railway operation committed to sustainable principles, including recycling of materials, and making best use of its existing resources.

The model suggested as the most suitable to UK conditions, microfranchising, presupposes a partnership between a local operator and an established train operating company. The company would provide a quality check on its 'little sister' and ensure that safety requirements are fully adhered to.

This model offers the most appropriate balance between local management and community control, with the safeguards of being part of a larger network – both in terms of infrastructure and operations. The approach also offers scope for the development of 'peripheral' activities which add value to the rail 'product', including tourism initiatives and other commercial activities which provide good quality local employment, for example, the local railway company could run integrated bus and taxi services.

Social inclusion



Train on Penistone line: rail still serves many rural communities in the UK

A local railway will be sustainable socially if it can offer a service which is accessible and affordable for all, running when people need it. It will help to sustain other activities in the community: people wanting to go about their daily lives in various ways,

using rail (and complementary modes) as their favoured choice. Good transport helps sustain people's quality of life – giving them access to friends and relatives, to culture and recreation, to shopping, health and a range of other services.

Developing added value

An economically sustainable railway isn't just one that pays its bills, though that is important. Being able to win new passengers through offering improved, good quality services is an essential part of what a local rail operator should be doing. Additional business can also be won through peripheral – but important – business activities. These could include a range of activities from on-train catering, tourism packages, cycle hire, station restaurants and cafés, and accommodation. This is not to suggest that a sustainable branch line will not require external financial support: they are expensive to run and maintain, just like roads. However, it may be possible to provide better value for money to the public purse, by encouraging modal shift from car to rail, and opening up new opportunities for those who do not have access to a car.

Supporting the local economy

But that is not the total picture in terms of economic sustainability. Following the effects of the foot and mouth epidemic, the locally managed railway can be part of the process of the rural renaissance, directly and indirectly. Directly, as an employer of local labour: train crew, track maintenance staff, and administrative and management staff.

The indirect economic benefits are equally important, and are best seen in two related ways. The indirect 'transport' benefits are bringing visitors into the area who spend money – not just on the railway, but in shops, pubs, and visitor attractions. The railway also means that people – rich and poor alike – can live in

pleasant rural surroundings and be able to travel to urban centres. Rural areas need people with high incomes who spend it in the area, as well as ensuring local people with limited incomes can afford to live in the area and travel out to employment nearby or further afield. A railway can play a big part in meeting both those needs. This goes back to making rail the first choice, not last. People on high incomes have the option of using the car – they need to be persuaded by quality and comfort that the train is the best option, not the only one.

The other 'indirect' benefit of a local railway operation is purchasing. A locally managed railway should purchase goods which are available locally – for catering, office services and equipment, and a wide range of other goods and services. This happens almost spontaneously through business networking and informal social contacts. It does not happen now because railway managers are often hundreds of miles away, not based in the local community. The local railway should be proud to offer local produce for sale at its stations and on its trains, rather than mass-produced, pre-packed goods.

The green branch line

Environmental sustainability has a number of dimensions in the local railway context. Rail is accepted as one of the more environment-friendly forms of transport, with lower emissions than road traffic and with a less damaging impact on land – there are few new railways constructed and generally the land they take is less than that of a new road. Rail can provide a quality alternative to using the car, as well as taking freight off the roads – but that needs to be fought for, not simply asserted. People will not choose rail simply because it is more 'green' – they will have to be convinced that it's a better quality product than they have hitherto thought.

Rail must not rest on its 'green' laurels, but should strive to maintain and improve its position. New diesel engines (the most likely traction for most rural lines in the foreseeable

future) should be low polluting and highly energy-efficient. Stations should be environmentally sustainable – using appropriate materials and in some cases using alternative energy sources including solar and wind power. Broome station, on the Heart of Wales Line, has its modest lighting requirements met by solar power.

A local rail operation will be well placed to make best use of resources and recycle and re-engineer equipment where possible, using its local expertise. It can also profit from re-use or sale of surplus materials. For example the Dartmoor Railway, operating between Okehampton and Crediton, earns around £10,000 each year from the sale of timber it fells along the side of the line. On the ‘commercial’ main line railway, contractors often just leave cut timber to rot.

A new political landscape for rail

The Hatfield accident changed everything, ultimately leading to the winding-up of Railtrack early in October. From rail ‘not being a priority’ for Prime Minister, Tony Blair, it’s now very much at the top of the agenda. The government is proposing to establish the new Railtrack as a not-for-profit company and the Strategic Rail Authority has suggested that there should be greater integration between train operations and railway infrastructure.

How will these developments impact on proposals for microfranchising? Regional rail must not be neglected in the rush to invest in the south-east, to meet the government’s growth targets in the 10 year Transport Plan. Rail forms very much a part of the government’s rural regeneration agenda, and the Countryside Agency has given strong support to rural rail initiatives. The Strategic Rail Authority has backed rural projects with funding from its Rail Passenger Partnership scheme. The objective conditions are right for a leap forward in how we manage our local railways, in ways which improve efficiency, provide better passenger services and stimulate the local economy.

Working with the new Railtrack

If a local railway is to run trains and maintain the track, the positive support and encouragement of the infrastructure company is essential. The establishment of the new Railtrack offers a very exciting opportunity to create a new form of social enterprise in the UK which recognises the importance of sustainability, social inclusion and regeneration and understands the links with railways. The proposals for a community railway could mesh well with the wider mission of the new company, with the national infrastructure company acting as a kindly landlord, and the local company getting on with the job of developing a top quality rail service.

Company structure

The structure of the local railway company could take several forms, and developing it as a form of social enterprise makes obvious sense. In the community transport sector, most operations are not-for-profit companies controlled by their members, and a smaller number are cooperatives. These models could be applied to a small railway company, giving it further legitimacy in the local community.

The Esk Valley pilot

A pilot project for a microfranchise is already at the development stage. The Esk Valley Railway Development Company has been formed, as a company limited by guarantee, to cover the Middlesbrough-Whitby Line, which serves the rural communities in Eskdale, North Yorkshire. Representatives of local authorities, the business community and the North Yorkshire Moors National Park are on the board of the company, which is working closely with the existing train operator, Arriva. The

company is closely involved with the Whitby Market Town Initiative⁴, sponsored by the Countryside Agency, and Yorkshire Forward – the Regional Development Agency for Yorkshire and the Humber. The vision of the new company is to re-create a railway base in Whitby, with engineering and servicing facilities, a train crew base, and strong links with other local businesses. Later this year, the Strategic Rail Authority will call for bids for its new North of England franchise, and it is hoped the Esk Valley microfranchise will take the form of a local sub-contracted operation of the main franchise.

Towards the sustainable branch line

The positive climate created by publication of the Strategic Rail Authority’s *Strategic Plan* offers an opportunity for creative thinking at the local level, where rail’s strengths as a sustainable, safe and fast form of transport can be linked into the social inclusion and regeneration agenda. By bringing a local focus back to the running of railways it makes it easier to link up with a range of local and regional regeneration initiatives such as the Market Towns Initiative. The successful development of locally owned and operated regional lines on the continent shows the way forward for the UK.

Notes

1. The *Strategic Plan* is available from the Strategic Rail Authority, 55 Victoria Street, London SW1E 0EU. A summary of the plan is available from TR&IN – see TR&IN website: www.platform8.demon.co.uk
2. See ACoRP’s website on www.acorp.uk.com
3. More examples are given in P Salveson, *Branching Out: railways for rural communities*, TR&IN 2000
4. See P Salveson and J Barnes, *Trains for Market Towns*, Countryside Agency 2001