

### **About ACoRP:**

i. The Association of Community Rail Partnerships (ACoRP) is a national, not-for-profit umbrella body working across Britain to support, advocate and represent the community rail movement. The community rail movement is made up of hundreds of small community groups, such as station adoption groups, and larger and more formal community rail partnerships (CRPs) that work along whole or multiple lines, connecting communities with their railways. Community rail partnerships and groups carry out a wide range of activities, including:

- promoting understanding and use of the railways, such as communicating local developments or encouraging rail travel for leisure and tourism purposes
- helping communities support, feed into and influence their railway and station's development so it better meets their needs, such as coordinating volunteer groups to maintain and enhance stations, or advising train operators on local needs and demand
- bringing disused station buildings and land back into community use, such as by achieving renovations, setting up community group spaces, or running social enterprises
- running a range of activities to bring people together and tackle social exclusion linked to the railways, such as local events, creative projects and educational programmes.

The value of such work has been reviewed in the 2015 report the [Value of Community Rail](#), finding that CRPs more than pay for themselves, contributing £3.4m per annum in volunteering hours alone, bringing social and economic value, and seeing above average passenger growth.

ii. ACoRP's membership includes more than 50 CRPs and many more station adoption groups. Our work includes providing a year-round programme of training opportunities and seminars, a range of written materials, annual awards recognising and sharing good practice in community rail, and supporting members through ad hoc advice, planning support, facilitating networking and relationship development, and sharing ideas and experience.

iii. We are funded annually by the Welsh Government to support and enhance community rail in Wales, including through our events and materials, advocating for the community rail movement at national and regional level, and providing direct support to the five Welsh community rail partnerships and many smaller groups. We also receive core funding from the Department for Transport and a range of industry partners.

iv. ACoRP remains a small organisation (with 11 team members), but underwent significant expansion and reorganisation in late 2016. We are therefore in the process of significantly stepping up our work to support members and promote community rail, and are in discussion with the Welsh Government about how this will take shape in Wales as we move into 2017-18.

### **Inquiry response:**

#### **How effective is the Welsh Government's approach to the development, procurement and delivery of the rail franchise?**

1. To broadly summarise our position, we believe it is essential that the new franchise should seek to build on and enhance the value of community rail partnerships and groups. We are grateful for the continued support of ACoRP and CRPs provided by the Welsh Government and wish to develop further the relationship we have established. However, we also strongly recommend that it

should be a franchise obligation for the new train operator to support community rail, through funding provided to community rail partnerships and groups, funding provided to ACoRP to advise and share good practice across the sector, and collaborative working with these parties. At present, we have not been informed whether the Welsh Government is committed to this type of approach, but continue to liaise with our contacts and hope this will be a key feature.

2. At the time of writing, ACoRP is also not fully appraised of the Welsh Government's plans for engaging ACoRP and CRPs in the development of the franchise. Consultation and dialogue with those directly delivering and supporting community rail is of course important to ensuring the ongoing success of the movement. There has been some engagement so far – we understand workshops have been taking place – but engagement has been varied and greater communication would be helpful. ACoRP is looking forward to attending a bidders' meeting on 15 March, but we were invited to this by the Welsh Government only after hearing about it and enquiring if we might attend. We are not currently clear how ACoRP and CRPs will be engaged beyond this, although it may be the Welsh Government's intention to provide greater clarity at this event.

3. We are unsure at present exactly what the bidding and procurement process will look like. Our broad understanding is that the process is likely to be markedly different to the Department for Transport's process for awarding franchises, taking an approach of asking bidders to explain how they will address a certain set of issues. We have some concerns about risks that may arise from this type of approach (below), but are otherwise unclear how and whether this might offer advantages or disadvantages to community rail due to not being fully appraised of the plans.

4. We understand that bidders may be asked to set out how they will respond to the 14 wellbeing objectives set out in the Taking Wales Forward strategy. We agree with the idea of working to ensure that the new franchise agreement aligns with broader strategic goals to enhance wellbeing, and believe this kind of approach could be beneficial. However, we note that some of these 14 objectives appear to have only marginal relevance to our railways, and they are designed to be specifically about wellbeing in Wales rather than the wider Wales and Borders franchise area. A significant proportion of the Wales and Borders Franchise lines (including several community railway lines) run across the border into England. We suggest that perhaps the eight more general wellbeing 'goals' in Taking Wales Forward, broadened out to ensure their appropriateness both sides of the border, might offer a strong framework for the bidding process.

### **Key risks and how they can be mitigated**

5. We have identified the below potential risks to the community rail movement and its contribution to communities and railways, if the Wales and Borders Franchise arrangements are not appropriately robust and supportive of community rail. These are summarised below in response to the Committee's interest in this point. However, we would emphasise that all can be mitigated, and in many cases turned into opportunities, through a considered and robust franchising process, which we recommend is developed and delivered in consultation with ACoRP and its members.

6. As noted above, our understanding is that the Welsh Government's franchise process is likely to be different to the DfT's, asking bidders to explain how they will respond to a number of issues, rather than stipulating what they need to deliver. It seems possible that an approach of this kind, if not carefully designed, could involve some level of subjective decision making if it is not based on comparing like with like. This could leave the door open to accusations of the process not being entirely robust and fair, and even judicial review. Of course, this could be damaging to the Welsh Government and public trust in the way our railways are run, and disruptive to the delivery and support of community rail.

7. If provision is not written into the new franchise, there is a risk of CRPs and groups not being adequately supported through ongoing funding. If they do not have access to appropriate and continued levels of funding, their important work engaging communities and promoting the

railways will suffer, and they could be forced to close. CRPs and groups are largely dependent on investment from the Welsh Government and the current franchise holder, especially now that funding previously received from local authorities has largely dried up. If provision of funding is written into the new franchise, as is the case elsewhere, it has the advantage of ensuring money is allocated specifically to community rail for the duration of the franchise, providing security and clarity for CRPs and groups, and allowing for further growth of community rail. It also can facilitate close partnership working between CRPs, groups, ACoRP and the franchise holder towards coherent support for community rail, helping to maximise its value. We therefore recommend the Welsh Government works with bidders and uses a carefully-developed franchise process to ensure no drop or gap in funding, that adequate and ideally increased funding is available for a broad range of community rail activities, and that arrangements are communicated to ACoRP and its members in a clear, timely manner. It may be most beneficial to CRPs and groups' ongoing development to provide a combination of funding from both the franchise holder and Welsh Government. In addition, there is a need for clarity about how funding will be made available to support development to lines and stations across the franchise, including in the borders area. We believe it is important that the Welsh Government works with CRPs, ACoRP and the DfT to ensure the widest possible benefit to community rail, and that no groups fall down funding 'gaps'.

8. Related to the above, there is also a risk to the crucial support ACoRP provides to CRPs and groups in the Welsh franchise area if this work is not properly funded. ACoRP provides guidance, training and development, networking and good practice sharing (across Britain), and advice on issues and opportunities as they arise. Currently our Wales and Borders work is supported by the Welsh Government through an annually-reviewed grant. Were this work to receive increased or longer-term funding, wholly or partly through the franchise, it would enable ACoRP to further step up this work, and support CRPs and groups to deliver (and evaluate and report on) high-quality, well-organised activities that deliver maximum benefit to their communities and railways. ACoRP's long-running and broad experience, established systems, processes and partnerships, and recently-expanded, knowledgeable team, is ideally placed to continue supporting, advising and sharing best practice among Wales and Borders community rail partnerships and groups – but ongoing funding, and strong relationships with government and industry, is vital to this.

9. There is a risk to the community rail movement in Wales and Borders if there is inadequate clarity and understanding (through the franchise process and beyond) about what community rail can achieve in terms of direct benefits to communities and railways and contributing to sustainable development. An extensive range of benefits can be (and are being) realised through community rail, to do with social inclusion and community cohesion, health and wellbeing, prosperity, mobility and sustainable travel and development. While ACoRP's has many examples of such positive outcomes being delivered, we are currently considering how we might better assess and quantify such benefits. At present, the Welsh Government does not have a strategy for community rail (as the DfT does, currently being reviewed with our input), so there is perhaps a need for a clearer narrative about the potential of community rail to contribute more. There is an opportunity in the new franchise for the Welsh Government to work with ACoRP, our members and partners to develop greater clarity about what community rail does and can contribute socially and economically in Wales and the Borders, and avoid too narrow a focus.

10. Another risk to community rail, which can be mitigated through well-thought-through franchising arrangements, relates to creativity, diversity and innovation in community rail, and ensuring this is cultivated. As a membership organisation, we constantly survey (and collate and share) a huge range of activities by community rail partnerships and groups, which often find innovative ways to help communities connect with and get the most from their railways. This includes work as diverse as renovating historic railway buildings for use by local social enterprises and arts groups, to involving mental health service users in station gardening, to promoting more regular weekend rail services. This innovation and variation partly stems from responding to widely differing needs and interests within local communities. Indeed, being attentive to local needs and interests is something we actively encourage among our members, while also supporting them to

address skills gaps, improve quality and efficiency, and learn from others. While there is clearly value in helping CRPs and groups to raise standards, operate professionally and learn from each other, franchise arrangements should be devised so they encourage, rather than suppress, innovation and creativity, with acknowledgement to the fact that these are small, grassroots, community organisations and should be valued as such for their unique contribution.

11. Finally, as referenced above, there may potentially be a risk of the franchising process overlooking the cross-border nature of these railways, and missing the opportunity to ensure collaboration and sharing across England and Wales (and beyond), which is crucial for community rail and rail passengers. Four of the five Wales and Borders CRPs' lines operate across the border, and the Borders area sees a significant range of community rail activity. CRPs work along a line (or multiple lines), and it would be neither desirable nor practical for them to work differently or do more on one side of border than the other. The railways in Wales and across the border in England are of course highly inter-dependent in terms of their operation and development and passenger numbers. On this basis, we would suggest that greater clarity from the Welsh Government and DfT, about how the management of railways within and connecting to the Borders area will work, would be welcomed by those in community rail.

### **Priorities for the franchise specification**

12. We have outlined below our suggestions for how the Welsh Government can take advantage of this opportunity to further support and enhance community rail in the Wales and the Borders franchise area, enabling greater value to be delivered to local communities and economies and the railways. Again, we emphasise the importance of ongoing communication, consultation and dialogue with ACoRP and CRPs and groups throughout the franchising process, to further plan and coordinate delivery of such priorities.

13. We suggest the franchise specification includes the following priorities in relation to community rail:

- a) Ensuring adequate, ideally increased, investment into community rail throughout the franchise period, including: direct funding of a broad range of community rail activities that seek to deliver positive outcomes to do with social inclusion and community cohesion, health and wellbeing, prosperity, mobility and sustainable travel and development; plus investment in expert support, advice and information sharing provided by ACoRP;
- b) Ensuring the community rail movement is supported and heard by the rail industry and policy makers, through understanding and constructive relationships at local and regional level, and opportunity for community rail to influence and inform the ongoing development of our railways: as CRPs and groups are rooted in the community they offer an ideal vehicle for ensuring that development is in tune with local needs, demand and opportunities;
- c) Scope and support for developing and nurturing additional CRPs, including in the borders area, and providing ongoing needs-orientated skills development, training and good practice information and advice, drawing on ACoRP's long-running experience;
- d) Encouraging and supporting (through and with ACoRP) specific development areas in community rail identified by ACoRP, its members and partners as offering particular opportunities for increased social and economic benefit, such as: development of management and planning within CRPs, station buildings development, communications and tourism promotion, social inclusion work;
- e) Promoting understanding of community rail within the rail industry and on a wider basis, making clear the benefits it can deliver, and supporting effective collaboration;
- f) Linking the rail franchise with wider work in Wales (and wider) to promote active and sustainable travel, such as under the Active Travel Act, bus service development, and community transport provision.

14. As a general point, we also propose that benefit might be maximised from this franchise process and arrangements if there is a focus not just on passengers and 'taxpayers', important

though these groups are, but more widely on the communities that these railways serve. The many excellent examples we have collated of community rail in action show how communities can be effectively connected with and engaged in their local railways, not just as passengers, but also as volunteers, students, families, tourists, day-trippers, event and activity participants, artists, gardeners, shoppers, museum and gallery visitors... the list goes on. This type of wider engagement not only provides direct benefits to health, wellbeing and prosperity, but also generates understanding, pride and enthusiasm for the railways, feeding into railway use. A broader focus, through this franchise, on how the Wales and Borders railways can best serve *communities* and meet their needs, may help bring about even greater benefit, to passengers and taxpayers specifically but also to society as a whole.

For any queries on this submission, contact ACoRP on [info@acorp.uk.com](mailto:info@acorp.uk.com) or 01484 548926.