



Promoting Car-Free Days out through a Rail Partnership

Category: Workshop

In case of a workshop: Tourist/Leisure/Shopping sector

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Introduction

To start with, just a brief introduction to the Devon & Cornwall Rail Partnership.

The Rail Partnership is one of the longest established and largest community rail partnerships in the United Kingdom. The Partnership's main activities are focused on five rural railway branch lines in the counties of Devon and Cornwall, the far-western peninsula of England.

It is a non-profit organisation, based at the University of Plymouth.

We work not just to promote travel on rural branch lines and seek improvements to services and facilities – but also to promote the places served by the branch lines and help the local economy.

Of the lines the Partnership focuses on:

- Two link sub-regional centres with their nearest regional centre and main line rail services (Barnstaple - Exeter, known as the Tarka Line, and Falmouth - Truro)
- Two are predominantly holiday lines, providing links to important seaside resorts (Newquay and Looe)
- and the fifth provides a vital link particularly for rural residents to reach Plymouth in an area where road access is very poor (as well as providing a tourism link into an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty – the Tamar Valley – and beyond to Dartmoor National Park). This is the Plymouth – Gunnislake branch line, known as the Tamar Valley Line.

We are particularly fortunate that these branch lines offer some of the most scenic rail journeys in Britain.

The Rail Partnership grew out of promotion groups set up to promote two of these branch lines in the late 1980s.

In 1991, the main partners, Devon & Cornwall County Councils, the University of Plymouth, British Rail and a UK Government body, the then Countryside Commission joined together to establish an office with a full time Rail Partnership Officer at the University and today's Devon and Cornwall Rail Partnership was born.

Over the following few years, the Partnership expanded to include three other rural branch lines, as well as mount large scale regional promotions campaigns.

The main partners joined by Plymouth City Council continue to fund the office while promotional and other activity is funded by local authorities and other bodies relevant to each line and directed by a Branch Line Working Party for each branch.

The Partnership has also had a good deal of success in attracting match funding from a number of sources – most notable are:

- A grant of £235,000 from the EU's European Regional Development Fund towards promotional activity between 1997 and 1999.
- The granting of Rural Transport Partnership status to the Rail Partnership by a UK Government Agency, the Countryside Agency in August 2000.

This has brought a new member of staff to the team particularly looking at how to increase the usage and usefulness of rural stations and will see nearly £1.5 million invested in the branch lines over the next three years.

In promoting both travel on rural branch lines and the places served by them, getting the message out in the key urban areas of Exeter and Plymouth, in particular, is extremely important.

With a population of over 250,000, Plymouth is the largest city on the South Coast. Its location, fabulous coastal scenery and history make it an attractive visitor destination in itself with nearly 12 million tourism arrivals per year.

One of our branch lines, the Tamar Valley Line, links Plymouth with Gunnislake on a scenic ride up into the Tamar Valley AONB (Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty).

Plymouth is within easy reach of other branch line destinations and there are many attractive day trip opportunities.

One of our key goals has been to get this across to both residents and visitors.

“Days Out” Leaflets

For the last three years, one of the ways we have done this is by producing an attractive, but simple “Days Out from Plymouth” leaflet for each timetable change.

This includes a brief description of the destination, with photo, together with suggested weekday train times suitable for a day trip, plus fares. Last Summer, thanks to additional funding from local railway company Wales & West Trains, we were able to produce 110,000 of these leaflets, 80,000 of which were delivered to homes in the City with a local free newspaper.

The two Tourist Information Centres and the station were well supplied, leaflets were distributed by a marketing company through leaflet racks in hotels, restaurants, pubs etc, and also to local hotels and guest houses for their guests.

The same strategy is being employed in Exeter, the second largest centre in the two counties with a population of 111,000. It's not really tenable to promote day trips to the Cornish branch lines from Exeter (though since it opened last year, we have included the new Eden Project) but Barnstaple and the Tarka Line feature prominently.

The leaflet also publicises cycle hire from Barnstaple station. The Tarka Trail over the old railway to Bideford and Torrington offers safe, level cycling away from traffic and is very popular. The cycle hire operator offers a £2 discount for rail users.

Some 38,000 leaflets were distributed door to door in Exeter with the free newspaper.

The leaflet is put together in a modular way – meaning that once you have your photo and description of the destination, it is easy to do leaflets for days out from other towns.

Every Summer we have produced “Days Out” leaflets from Looe and Newquay, but in 2001, thanks to that additional funding from Wales and West, new Days Out leaflets from Torbay, Barnstaple, Truro/Falmouth and Penzance/St Ives have hit the streets, together with flyers promoting Day Trips from Barnstaple to Exeter and Plymouth to Newquay.

A total of 710,000 “Days Out” leaflets were produced last Summer, with 440,000 delivered to local households with free newspapers.

Dartmoor Sunday Rover

Another key tool in promoting car-free tourism is the Dartmoor Sunday Rover, a value-for-money ticket (just £6 adult) which allows travel on two rail routes and a network of bus services across Dartmoor on a Summer Sunday. The aim is to make it easy to explore Dartmoor without a car.

The Rover and network are sponsored by Devon County Council. Train services both on the Tamar Valley Line and the Dartmoor Line (Exeter – Okehampton) are chartered from Wales & West – with the Tamar Valley service being chartered by a partnership led by the Rail Partnership and Devon County Council.

The Partnership promotes the Sunday Rover in Plymouth – city centre information displays are organised in the main shopping area on a number of Saturdays to spread the word, regular advertisements are placed in Plymouth's local daily paper and a special "Days Out from Plymouth to the Tamar Valley and Dartmoor" leaflet is produced which includes worked out day trip ideas using the Sunday Rover.

110,000 of these were produced last Summer of which 80,000 were delivered to local households. The Sunday Rover is also advertised in the Days Out from Plymouth leaflet, and those for Exeter and Torbay.

In addition, Information Assistants are employed to travel on morning and early afternoon trains to help people plan their days out, carrying a range of useful leaflets and able to offer advice on connections, village facilities and walks from the railway.

In terms of success, there was a 17% increase in the number of Sunday Rover tickets sold either at Plymouth or on Tamar Valley Line trains in 2000 from 1999, up from 964 to 1131 sales, and passenger counts on the first three return services between Plymouth and Gunnislake showed a 20% increase in usage, year on year, up from 2944 to 3536.

Given that 2000 was the ninth year of operation of the Sunday Rover, we were particularly pleased with these results.

Other ways

Other ways of getting people to try the train have included running special themed trains, such as Jazz Trains and even events like a "Strawberries & Cream" train, "Wizard Trains" and a rail-based beer festival.

Likewise promoting activities from the railway, such as walks, both guided and self-guided, and visits to country pubs. Both of these feature highly in our Rural Transport Partnership Action Plan – and indeed we have just launched the Tarka Line Rail-Ale Trail, promoting travel by train to very rural pubs in Devon, and a series of guided walks linked to the line.

The future

Continuity is very important and we are working hard to secure funding to continue both the “Days Out” leaflets and Dartmoor Sunday Rover promotions at much the same level as now.

Particularly vital is getting information into people’s homes – while stations and tourist information centres are very important for distributing leaflets, only having leaflets at these points greatly reduces your chances of attracting people out of their cars.

Why do we have Rail Partnerships in the UK?

So, why do we have Rail Partnerships in the UK?

There are around twenty Community Rail Partnerships in the United Kingdom – all work on secondary and/or rural routes and almost these railways have one thing in common – they were threatened with closure in the 1960s.

Local communities fought to save these lines and, all these years later, support for their retention is still very strong.

However the railways, nationalised British Rail or privatised Train Operating Companies, simply don’t have the management time or money to devote to the branch lines and secondary routes on a sustained basis, whether it be promoting them or maintaining a dialogue with the local community.

This is not a criticism – it’s a fact of life. British Rail then and the privatised railway now will necessarily concentrate limited resources on the main lines, where they see they can make the quickest returns.

Rail Partnerships are the way of getting over this problem. The best way of securing the future of these secondary and rural lines is to get more people on the trains – and to make the lines as useful as possible in all respects to the communities they serve.

To achieve that is why local authorities and other bodies came together to join in partnership with the rail industry to help fund promotions, together with improvements and community involvement.

In setting up the Rail Partnership, they created the means for promotional and other work to be done with the least need to take up railway managers’ limited time.

This is a “win-win” situation. The local communities get the promotional and other work done to boost the branch lines (helping the local economy along the way) and they get a channel to raise queries and concerns. The railway gets the benefit from the extra passengers, from the higher public profile the promotional work creates and from the links the Partnership creates with local organisations.

More information

There is an umbrella body for Community Rail Partnerships in the UK - the Association of Community Rail Partnerships and they can help with further information about Community Rail Partnerships generally and provide contact details for other Community Rail Partnerships.

The contact is:

Dr Paul Salveson,
General Manager,
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Brian Jackson House
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I will of course be happy to provide further information about the Devon & Cornwall Rail Partnership.

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