West Somerset Railway PLC

Application to Bishops Lydeard Parish Council for Community Infrastructure Levy Funding

Introduction

This paper constitutes an application to the Parish Council for Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) resources in order that the WSR PLC can invest in extending car parking capacity and supporting facilities at Bishops Lydeard station.

The Parish Council will be aware that the PLC in conjunction with Somerset Council is about to submit a Strategic Outline Business Case (SO BC) to Government for the restoration of scheduled trains between Taunton and Bishops Lydeard. The proposals in this paper form part of that submission. However, even if the Business Case were not to be approved, the need for these facilities is becoming ever more pressing for the reasons set out below.

The Case for CIL Investment

The West Somerset Railway is one of Somerset's primary tourist and leisure attractions and, along with other nationally recognised organisations like the National Trust, Butlins, English Heritage and Exmoor National Park, is instrumental in bringing hundreds of thousands of visitors to West Somerset every year.

Like many of its contemporaries in the heritage railway sector, the West Somerset Railway which is run by the PLC as a not-for-profit company, has spent the last three years recovering from the impact of Covid 19. It now has a successful and workable commercial model which, in 2023, saw in excess of 100,000 visitors to the railway. Of these, some 60% arrive at the railway through Bishops Lydeard station. The vast majority of these come by car with the balance using the 28 bus. It is therefore the primary gateway to the WSR. Many visitors also use the railway as the jumping off point to access other tourism and leisure opportunities across West Somerset.

The railway also employs around 45 staff and has some 900 active volunteers. In recent times, the PLC has started to base more staff and volunteers at Bishops Lydeard both to ease pressure on accommodation at Minehead but also in reflection of the fact that Bishops Lydeard is becoming increasingly busy.

The West Somerset Railway also plays a key role in delivering economic benefit to the local economy in around Bishops Lydeard. Visitors to the railway are encouraged to use the hospitality, visitor and other facilities in and around the village including the outlets in the Business Park immediately adjacent to the station. With all this however comes the challenge of parking, behaviours and the problems incurred when people cannot find parking and therefore turn away with consequent impact on their desire to return at a later date.

In 2023, the PLC bought the car park and toilet block at Bishops Lydeard from the outgoing Taunton Deane Borough Council. This is seen as a strategic asset for the

railway and its acquisition was therefore a priority to avoid any difficulties in their future use. Some modest investment has already been made in the toilet block.

The car park has a current capacity of 150**.** There is also a staff car park and a number of disabled parking places both of which are closer to the main station entrance. The visitor car park currently lacks any lined spacings and there are no electric vehicle charging points provided.

Historically, the PLC has been gifted the use of additional parking capacity for Galas and a small number of other special events from local farm owners and businesses. However, with the growth in visitor numbers experienced in 2023 and with evidence of a similar upward trend in 2024 (Spring Steam Spectacular Passenger Numbers for 2024 4613 vs 2023 3097) the pressure on parking capacity and the ability of the toilet block to meet the needs both of the physically able but also those with a range of disabilities is now becoming more evident.

The success of commercial and marketing activity across the PLC means that the 2024 offer to visitors on the WSR includes, in addition to the regular timetable, no less than 10 special events. Furthermore the hospitality offer is going from strength to strength with a combination of fish and chip, cream tea, cheese and cider, pasty and pint and afternoon tea catering specials running on no less than 40 occasions this year. Almost all of these trains originate and return to Bishops Lydeard.

The Quantock Belle dining train is nationally recognised as one of the premium dining services operated by the heritage railway sector and in 2024 will operate in various guises on no less than 22 occasions all of which start and terminate at Bishops Lydeard.

There is also the Green Agenda to consider here. The WSR has made progress in setting out its own environmental credentials following the completion of a railway wide Energy Audit in 2022. Key actions now being pursued through its business agenda include:

- Buildings Insulation
- Provision of Solar panels in key locations
- Biodiversity increasing attractiveness and sustainability of lineside habitats and in other locations owned or leased by the PLC.

The company would also like to contribute to provision of electric vehicle charging points. However, following discussions with Somerset Council, it is clear that the cost of installation, services connection and management including rent/lease alternatives is currently beyond the ability of the PLC to afford. Furthermore, it understands that the priority in this area for Somerset Council is the provision of charging points for on street parking vehicles and that the Parish Council has plans in this regard nearer to the centre of the village.

The PLC also recognises that it should be doing more to enable people with reduced mobility and other difficulties to access the railway. This is particularly the case in terms of public toilet and supporting facilities. The PLC would like to be able to enhance the current toilet block using the Changing Places modular model which would be added

to the current building. This would provide specialist toilet and washing facilities in an environment which is being configured for reduced mobility use.

Why Now?

With the exception of electric vehicle charging, all of the considerations around car park capacity enhancement have been recognised in the Strategic Outline Business Case with the proposals for additional car parking capacity, electric vehicle parking and toilet block enhancement.. However, given the current challenges around the national political climate and the present position on rail investment short of the General Election, it is uncertain as to whether the SO BC will be successful.

Irrespective of the SO BC and the additional visitor footfall that scheduled trains are intended to deliver, the pressures on the railway and the consequent negative impact on the local community in terms of:

- Rogue parking
- Inability to meet the toilet and washing needs of disabled visitors
- Disappointed visitors who do not return
- Economic opportunity delivered through the adjacency of the railway

are all things that need to be addressed anyway. The availability of CIL resources therefore present an opportunity to deal with these issues locally and to enable the WSR to continue to support the local community and to contribute to its economic and environmental success.

The Proposal

The bid from the West Somerset Railway PLC includes the following components with estimated costs. If the application is successful then the PLC will seek competitive quotations as well as enter into negotiations with landowners in relation to land acquisition.

Item	**Estimated Cost £**
Lining of Current Car Park with designated spaces and lighting To increase the number of spaces available from 150. Precise increase to be calculated through discussions with preferred provider. Car park lighting will also be complemented with lighting through to the station entrance.	50,000
Toilet Block upgrade and extension to include a Changing Places facility for people with significant mobility issues Changing Places Toilets (changing-places.org)	50,000

Benefits To The Local Community

It is the view of the PLC that this investment will not only enable the WSR to continue to fulfil its role as a major tourism and leisure providers in West Somerset but that will have significant benefits for the local community. These are identified as including:

- A reduction in on street parking particularly on the western side of the A358 but also in the village itself;

- A reduction in people who turn away because of lack of station parking;

- Improved welfare facilities particularly for those existing individuals with reduced abilities and their families who use the railway;

- A clear incentive for new visitors with reduced abilities and their families to come to the railway as a result of the Changing Places installation of which there are currently less than 3000 in the UK. This will be a significant marketing tool for the railway and demonstrate evidence of commitment to disabled access by the local community;

- As visitor numbers continue to increase, further complementary economic benefit to the village arising from use of village facilities;

- Helps to put Bishops Lydeard “on the map” with the railway actively promoting the contribution that the local community has made to the continued success of the WSR through this initiative;

- Provides evidence of local “matched funding” which can be used to boost the case for reintroduction of scheduled services from the national network through the SOBC and, if successful, subsequent business case development;

Conclusion

This proposal is presented to the Parish Council for consideration. The WSR PLC would be very happy to discuss it with the Council if invited before any decision is reached.

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