



27th July 2020

Dear Prime Minister

cc Secretary of State, Parliamentary Under Secretary at DfT, Chair Net Zero APPG, Chair of Committee on Climate Change.

We are a collective of voices from various organisations in Somerset who are very keen to help you with your strategy to improve the active travel networks across the country. The intention of this letter is to request:

- **Political support for our project to transform the disused railways of the South West of England into multi-user Rights of Way by declaring this as being IN THE PUBLIC INTEREST at the highest level.**
- **Payments through the Environmental Land Management Scheme for landowners who willingly provide public access across their land to be put into effect as swiftly as possible with the possibility of claiming retrospective payments for providing this particular public good- which will encourage landowners to come forward at the earliest opportunity.**
- **For legislation at central government level that ensures liability for users of Department for Transport owned assets - such as old railway bridges - remains with the DfT, and is not transferred to local authorities**

We mostly represent locally based community driven groups who are striving to convert the disused railways, which were axed in the Beeching cuts of the 60s, into accessible off-road trailways for walkers, disabled users, cyclists and equestrians. However, amongst us are also groups representing environmental concerns as well as all of the user groups for whom we hope to improve accessibility through our endeavours.

All of us recognise that in order to manage the land in the way in which the government, the electorate and many landowners want (conservation and access) there is a cost, the majority of which is currently borne by the landowner. Some landowners may be prepared to give up land for the public good for no financial reward. However, we all need to recognise that a fair price should be available to those not in a position to offer up land for free.

We believe that there is an opportunity to provide incentives for landowners willing to cooperate through the Agriculture Bill and the Environmental Land Management scheme (ELM). We are pleased to see that willingness to allow multi-use traffic-free rights of way for all of the user groups across their land, connecting with the National Cycle Network or with local town active travel routes, is being considered as a qualifying method for landowners to claim payment under the scheme. We understand, however, that these payments are unlikely to happen before 2025. We would urge you and DEFRA to allow anyone providing this aspect of public good to be able to apply for retrospective payments to January 1st 2021 through the ELM scheme when it becomes available. This would encourage landowners who are not already providing access across their land to come forward at the earliest opportunity. It should certainly be made clear that a landowner who has been providing a right of way across their land historically will not be penalised for payment. This would also apply to all approved proposed networks of multi-user rights of way, not just those along disused railways.

We request that government recognises, supports and champions the positive actions taken by those Highway and Local Planning authorities which acknowledge the value that disused lines can offer to the overall health and economic wellbeing of the communities through which they pass and, when authorities show such vision, that Government will help to accelerate the often long winded and expensive process of taking a path from idea through to reality. County or District councils should be encouraged to adopt the routes once the infrastructure is installed. **By deeming such initiatives in the public interest at the highest level the obstacles often encountered in the planning and acquisition process can be more quickly overcome, allowing us to help you to achieve your goal of improving the active travel networks far faster than would be possible within the present system.**

We are also aware that there is a desire to bring back the railways in the south west and where this is financially possible we would all support this. We propose that should any section of the line be deemed appropriate for restoration either to a historic condition or to a modern working railway, that developers are encouraged to create a multi-user right of way alongside.

Having conducted a survey across the county with over 2000 respondents, an overwhelming majority of 98% were in support of this project. A more detailed survey that we released over a smaller radius (with almost 500 respondents so far) shows that **60% of respondents have someone in their household for whom an accessible railway would provide a vital benefit** - someone elderly, disabled or a parent with a pushchair who would otherwise be reliant on motorised transport. The magnificent Victorian infrastructure of the railway provides a safe and more crucially, level route through our often hilly landscape and will therefore open up our glorious countryside to this otherwise excluded group of people.

The people of Somerset want to

- support our NHS by being more active
- reduce car travel and emissions to combat the Climate Emergency
- have the means to improve our physical and mental well being
- have safe, accessible, inclusive active travel routes between town and country
- have the ability to tackle social isolation
- boost our tourism
- have new opportunities for business - such as horse and rider B&Bs
- once again have access to our heritage public thoroughfare

Transforming the disused railways in Somerset and indeed, across the country, into shared rights of way for all non motorised users ticks all of these boxes. We are all aware that now, more than ever, resources are thin on the ground; in the majority of places the level track of hardstanding still remains, vastly reducing the cost of installing a new right of way that has accessibility. Furthermore, **Department for Transport analysis concluded that every £1 invested in improving active travel gives a return of £10 in terms of the above benefits. If your government throws as much political backing behind such projects, as it has with HS2, community driven groups like ours can create a much cheaper, green and healthy alternative to providing much needed links between the towns and villages in the South West whilst requiring limited resources from local authorities.**

Most respectfully,

Sonia Kundu, Director Transforming Somerset & Dorset Rail Links CIC, on behalf of:

Somerset Rail to Trail Project
Frome's Missing Links
Steam Coast Trail
Strawberry Line
The Trails Trust

Sustrans
British Horse Society
Somerset Climate Action Network
Compass Disability
Wildlife Trusts

Greenways & Cyclerroutes
Cycling UK

Map showing the possibilities for multi-user active travel routes along disused railways in Somerset.

