

RVR TWAO - Public Enquiry

Submission from Cllr Susan Prochak, Deputy Leader, Rother District Council

Since I was elected as the District Councillor for the Parish of Salehurst and Robertsbridge in 1989, I knew of officer and member support for the restoration of the heritage railway line between Tenterden and Robertsbridge. Subsequent policies and plans, which all went out to public consultation confirmed the support of the Local Authorities. Our present MP, Huw Merriman and our previous MP, Greg Barker have both supported the project.

The Rother District Local Plan (2006)

The Rother District Local Plan (2006) included a specific policy (EN8) safeguarding a route westward from Bodiam to link with the mainline services at Robertsbridge (on the Hastings to London line). The inclusion of the policy set out Rother District Council's support, in principle, for the extension of the Kent and East Sussex Steam railway to Robertsbridge, subject to satisfactorily addressing environmental and road crossing issues.

Regular updates have been provided by the Charity Trustees of Rother Valley Railway on the progress of this project. There has been considerable work done, including the reconstruction of the track to Junction Road from Bodiam. Rother District Council awarded a grant of £25,000 in support of this. In 2012, the then Chief Executive of Rother District Council, responded to recent RVR developments writing how pleased the Council was with the impressive reconstruction of the bridges from Robertsbridge to Northbridge Street recognising the importance of tourism to the economy of the District.

The 'Options and Preferred Options' version of the Development and Site Allocations Local Plan (DaSA) was published for a 10-week public consultation between 12 December 2016 and 20 February 2017. During that early consultation version, the DaSA recognised the work being undertaken at Robertsbridge Station in implementing planning permission RR/2012/1357/P1, and the advanced state of planning application RR/2014/1608/P2 (which included significant technical work in relation to the highway crossings, environmental issues and flood risk matters) and the significant commitment of the Rother Valley Railway Ltd to pursue that scheme; consequently, the DaSA contained a draft policy (RVR1) supporting the continued allocation for the re-instatement of a railway link from Robertsbridge to Bodiam along its original route.

On 22/03/2017, planning permission was granted for the reinstatement of the Rother Valley Railway from Northbridge Street, Robertsbridge, to Junction Road, Bodiam. The Planning Committee supported this unanimously. Consequently, there was no need for the proposed allocation at this site (Policy RVR1) to be taken forward and it was therefore not included within the DaSA which was adopted in December 2019.

Economic benefits:

In 2018, Rother District Council and Hastings Borough Council commissioned a comprehensive report: *Economic Impact of Tourism on 1066 Country*. This research estimated that around £557 million was spent on trips to 1066 Country in 2018 by overnight and day visitors. Around £519.2 million directly benefited local businesses from hotels and restaurants to cafes, shops and attractions in 1066 Country. However, further 'additional expenditure' spent by visitors on second homes or boats and by friends and relatives, whom visitors are staying with or visiting, needs also to be accounted for as this represents a significant additional source of income for local businesses. It is estimated that this 'additional' expenditure generated a further £19.9 million in direct turnover for local businesses in 2018.

This income is estimated to have supported 10,830 Full-Time Equivalent Jobs in the local economy. These jobs are spread across a wide range of service sectors from catering and retail to public service jobs such as in local government, and not just tourism. According to the Office of National Statistics, there are 75,000 employee jobs across 1066 Country. Based on estimates, total tourism

related expenditure supported 20.2% of these jobs in 2018.

Rother District is an area of 200 square miles with 80% designated as a legally protected Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. There is little scope for significant new tourist attractions. A previous Chief Planning Officer stated there were only two projects possible in rural Rother, the Military Canal and the Rother Valley Railway. The restoration of the RVR line would expand the tourism offer of this part of SE England and support the tourism economy locally, sub-regionally and regionally, creating jobs and building on the already established Kent and East Sussex Railway, currently terminating at Bodiam. Connection to the main line to London would attract new visitors.

Once the Covid19 pandemic is over, the greatest challenge to all areas will be the support of jobs and incomes. Investment and support in this project would benefit and support the economy enormously.

Accessibility

RVR would be, if completed, one of the few heritage railways with a direct connection to a mainline to London and south to Hastings. Most visitor attractions depend access by car. The National Trust at Bodiam Castle has visitor numbers of over 300,000, but shows how partnership ticketing with Kent and East Sussex Railway can reduce car travel. However, many visitors still arrive at the castle by car. The completion of the link to the main line would be an enormous opportunity to reduce existing car travel. This would be in line with Rother's commitment to carbon reduction through its Climate Emergency Motion passed in 2019 and subsequent Environment Strategy.

New users, once the line is open, can be further encouraged to arrive by train with attractive combined ticket pricing. With any passengers arriving by car, there is available parking at the station, especially at weekends. On-street car parking in Robertsbridge is in the near future to be controlled by the introduction of Civil Parking Enforcement across Rother. Plans for this have gone through consultation and is awaiting implementation by the County Council.

Sir David Attenborough in his recent TV series reported that 69% of the population feel they are losing touch with non-urban surroundings and one in eight children have never seen a cow. The completion of the RVR link would open up our very special countryside to many, many more from urban areas right up the line to central London. The restored link would hugely amplify the heritage, recreational and educational value of the line through improved accessibility.

Heritage Railways.

Over the world, heritage railways are popular attractions not only for railway enthusiasts, but also for the wider public, especially children. When Rother Valley Railway gave the community free rides from Robertsbridge Station to Northbridge Street, one couldn't help noticing the excitement and pleasure this gave to not only children, but adults too.