



Ask-Annie participants attending a feedback session to share their views on how to help overcome barriers to travel on public transport

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West Midlands Railway welcomes new community rail strategy and recognises the importance of tackling loneliness.

West Midlands Railways has welcomed the government's new community rail strategy and has recognised the importance of tackling loneliness for some of the most vulnerable in society.

The report, which was published last week, recognises the impact of community station groups in bringing people together.

Community rail covers a range of activities around railway stations by local groups. This includes initiatives such as maintaining station gardens, producing art installations and running community engagement events with support of train operators.

These activities were praised for providing a community voice, promoting accessible travel, bringing communities together and enabling social and economic development. Community rail has also been recognised as an effective way to help tackle loneliness.

Speaking at the launch of a cross-Government strategy on tackling loneliness in October, Prime Minister Theresa May called loneliness 'one of the greatest public health challenges of our time'. The report also highlighted that around 200,000 older people have not had a conversation with a friend or relative in more than a month.

West Midlands Railway is looking to double the number of station adopters at its stations and is committed to working closely with local communities over the coming years.

The train operator is also developing a new scheme called Ask-Annie, in partnership with Viaqqio, to provide personalised travel advice and planning to concessionary pass holders over the age of 55.

Fay Easton, head of stakeholder and community engagement at West Midlands Railway, said: "We have identified that loneliness can have a crippling impact on people's lives and we are committed to playing our part in improving accessibility to our network. It is a positive step that the role of community rail has been recognised nationally and we want to build on this. We have been supporting the Ask-Annie project as a part of this commitment and would urge anyone who may be interested in the service to join our trial volunteers."

Ask-Annie is currently in its trial stages, and continues to look for volunteers to use the new service and give feedback on their experience.

Jackie, a current participant in the Ask-Annie trial, said: "Having reached a 'certain age', I reluctantly began planning to give up my car, before someone or something took the decision for me. This brought up some major worries

for me. Ask-Annie has 'nudged' me into trying public transport and I have discovered some advantages as it is cheaper, not necessarily slower, can be more relaxing and there is no need to park!"

Steve Cassidy, director at Viaqgio, said: "We are thrilled to be in the West Midlands and offering this new service for older people. By developing the Ask-Annie service with more and more users, we aim to change the face of travel for concessionary pass holders. By improving awareness of what transport exists, providing a way of obtaining support from other travellers as well as operators, and helping people get the best deals and access to new and existing services, members of Ask-Annie will find travel easier. That is our goal!"

The new community rail strategy has also been enthusiastically welcomed by community rail's umbrella body, the Association of Community Rail Partnerships (ACoRP).

Paul Webster, operations manager at ACoRP, said: "There are now 61 community rail partnerships nationwide, plus an estimated 1,300 station 'friends' groups, which coordinate community gardening and other volunteering activities at stations. Their activities are wide-ranging, but all aim to help communities get the most from their railways, and bring stations back into the heart of communities. New groups and projects are developing all the time, and we support West Midlands Railway in their aim to double the number of station adopters at their stations."

ENDS

Notes to editors

For further information on this release, call our press office on **03300 955150** or email press.office@wmtrains.co.uk

- Connecting Communities with the Railways: The Community Rail Development Strategy can be viewed [here](#)
- A connected society: A Strategy for tackling loneliness – laying the foundations for change can be viewed [here](#)

About 'Ask-Annie'

'Ask-Annie' is an integrated mobility service for concessionary pass holders over the age of 55. The service aims to improve how people relate to, use and combine modes of transport services to meet their lifestyle needs.

Volunteers can find out more and register to be part of the trial by going to www.ask-annie.co.uk or by calling **0808 169 1701** (9am-5pm, 7 days a week).

The project is a partnership between Viaqqio, part of the ESP Group and West Midland Trains.

About Viaqqio

Viaqqio is part of the ESP Group. From getting a travel pass into the hands of your customers; being on the end of a phone; or responding to webchat, email or social media enquiries – ESP supports the passenger on every step of their journey. We work hard to anticipate their needs today and tomorrow, helping you deliver a first-class service every time.

About ACoRP

The Association of Community Rail Partnerships (ACoRP) is dedicated to supporting community-based groups and partnerships that connect their community with their railway and deliver social benefit.

Across Britain, about 60 community rail partnerships, plus hundreds of station friends and other groups and social enterprises, make up the [community rail movement](#). It's a growing movement delivering a range of activities that bring people together and help communities get the most from their railways, as well as helping our railways to thrive. These activities range from community gardening and arts projects on stations, to helping people with

disabilities use rail, to advising train operators on meeting local needs: work carrying significant [social and economic value](#).

ACoRP provides support, advice and information to the community rail movement through [membership services](#) and [events](#). We share good practice and connect those working in community rail, while bringing together insights from the wider voluntary sector, rail industry and beyond.

We represent and advocate for community rail, providing a link between our members and national and devolved governments, partners and industry, promoting understanding of their contribution and how this can be nurtured. We also aim to raise awareness about community rail, explaining its importance, and promoting engagement with (and travel by!) community rail.

For more information on ACoRP and their response to the Community Rail Strategy go to www.communityrail.org.uk

About West Midlands Trains

West Midlands Trains operates both West Midlands Railway and London Northwestern Railway services.

- **London Northwestern Railway** services operate between Liverpool and Birmingham, and on the West Coast mainline to and from London Euston.
- **West Midlands Railway** services operate to destinations across the West Midlands via Birmingham New Street.

For more information on these services visit westmidlandsrailway.co.uk or londonnorthwesternrailway.co.uk

The West Midlands Trains franchise started on 10 December 2017 and will run until 2025/26.

West Midlands Trains operates 1,300 services a day, manages 150 stations and provides over 70 million passenger journeys a year. Over the course of the franchise, West Midlands Trains will be investing £1 billion into the rail network to deliver new trains, improved routes and station upgrades. This will include 400 new train carriages across the network and space for an extra 85,000 passengers into Birmingham and London at peak times.

The franchise is a joint venture between Abellio (70.1% share) and East Japan Railway Company / Mitsui & Co., Ltd (29.9% share in a 50:50 split). Abellio is the international passenger transport subsidiary of the Dutch national railway company, Nederlandse Spoorwegen. In the UK, Abellio operates ScotRail and Greater Anglia train services, Merseyrail services in a joint venture with Serco and buses through Abellio London. For more information visit www.abellio.com

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