

Dear Rail to Trail Supporter

As we come to the end of 2021, here's a roundup of the year's progress for the team at the Somerset Rail to Trail Project. With an ebb and flow of volunteers without whose hard work and determination this project wouldn't even exist, we were able to achieve a considerable amount despite the challenges that 2021 presented.

The negotiations which we initiated last year with DfT regarding the preservation of historic rail structures for active travel routes are coming to fruition. Highways England have been drawing up a permissive licence based approach contract which we hope will be the gold standard for local authorities and trail building groups across the country who wish to create 21st century active travel routes across, through or under these magnificent structures. This licence will allow DfT to perform regular maintenance on these structures to keep them safe for everyone's benefit without incurring any extra and unnecessary cost. We hope to see the first enactment of this licence for the two viaducts and tunnel running north out of Shepton Mallet, which is an extension of the Strawberry Line that, after ten years of being stalled, has finally been able to go ahead due to these agreements.

Of course as well as the old railway structures which remain there are probably an equal number of gaps where metal railway bridges were removed but their abutments remain in place. As bridging these often modest gaps has become eye wateringly expensive and can block future path projects we have been working with various partners to crack this problem by drawing up a low cost bridges handbook. This is going really well and is likely to be submitted for the bridges awards 2022 (yes there is such a thing!). We will share more information as soon as we can.



With some amazing support from Spark Somerset who help charities across the county, we were able to access some professional advice which enabled us to secure a further total of £10,000 in funding from two grants; Avon & Somerset Police Road Safety Trust and Nineveh Charitable Trust. This, combined with the £20,000 which South Somerset District Council pledged to us at the very end of last year, means that we are now not only able to pay for

training on all matters regarding public access from The Trails Trust, but we can also pay for the knowledge and experience of trusted local land agents to act as intermediaries in negotiations with landowners.

This is important to us as the landowners along the route are integral to the success of our initiative and it is crucial that the project is as beneficial to them as individuals as it is to the wider community. All of their needs and concerns must be adequately considered and addressed to ensure that everyone is happy. Training for our volunteers and land agents will begin in the new year followed by negotiations with the landowners along our route from Henstridge all the way to Glastonbury.

We were also instrumental in starting up the Somerset Active Travel Forum, with representatives from The Ramblers, Disabled Ramblers, Sustrans, Cycling UK, British Horse Society, The Trails Trust, Frome's Missing Links, The Strawberry Line, Steam Coast Trail, South Somerset Bridleways Association, Isle of Wedmore Access Group and Mendip Bridleways and Byways Association. This collaboration is crucial for creating multi-user paths as well as promoting better information sharing between the groups. Having a unified voice when approaching our County Council or any other authority is not only stronger but ultimately more efficient too. Our first combined action was to draw together all our proposed routes onto a single map, showing how they can all link up and providing a strategic active travel network vision for the county. We have also discussed surfacing types as well as the possibilities of having group suppliers to bring material costs down.



Work further along our proposed route in Sedgemoor District is also progressing as we investigate the possibilities along old droves and continue to work with the Environment Agency to figure out the best options for everyone.

Last but certainly not least, we'd like to put out a heartfelt thankyou to all the volunteers who came on board to help us, however briefly. From the students who took time out in between their studies to help build our social media profile to those who helped us after work and at weekends, filling out boring funding applications, keeping our website updated, doing land registry searches, making sure our accounts are all present and correct, attending online meetings and even making a presentation or two. Community donations of £1,439.55 from our crowdfunder last year just about kept us going before the next pot of money was secured. Without continued community support through volunteer help, through your donations and even through online loyalty in sharing and retweeting our posts, this entirely community volunteer led project could not exist, let alone thrive.