

## COMMUNITY RAIL

# New lease of life

How the Central stations initiative is bringing new life to old stations – and their local communities

What's a station for? There are the obvious answers you probably thought of first, second and maybe even third.

But with the innovative Central stations initiative, there's yet another use: turning empty, redundant, unwanted, blank-eyed Victorian station buildings with no commercial potential into premises that give life to the station, plus focus, inspiration and maybe even hope to local communities.

More than that, it helps link the railway to the community again, and helps to revitalise stations for passengers.

And while there's no such thing as a free lunch, the long-term leases (up to 25 years) to non-profit organisations and local groups are set at peppercorn rents.

It's an idea that seems to be working well in the pilot stations – and could be rolled out across the network in future.

## THREE'S NO CROWD

The key to the initiative is a new, standard, low-cost three-party lease between Network Rail, the tenant and the train operating company (TOC). A



Oakham is bustling with new tenants

lease as long as 25 years is beyond the franchise term, so Network Rail underwrites the lease in the event of one of the parties changing over time.

Our approval is also required as landlord for major works on the buildings – and the long-term leases encourages investment in the new building by the new tenants as well as unlocking support from other sources such as local authorities and local development agencies, the National Lottery and the Arts Council.

And where station buildings within the Central stations (or any other TOC) project are either listed or in a

conservation area, they may be eligible for a grant from the Railway Heritage Trust.

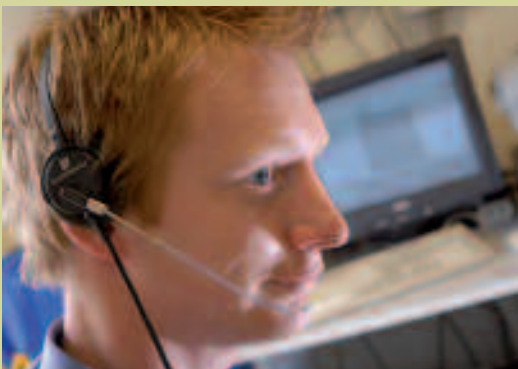
ACoRP (The Association of Community Rail Partnerships) is leading the project. It's a not-for-profit organisation which aims to provide impartial support, advice and guidance to anyone who is involved with rural and local rail services. "This would have been impossible with Network Rail and the train operating company," said their project officer Susan Miles. "I'm so pleased that the company has had the foresight to do this."

"The benefits to the operator are improved safety, a reduction in vandalism and greater local

## CREATIVE USE OF SPACE

"The new use of many of the station premises is as innovative as the project itself," explained ACoRP's Susan Miles. They include:

- a redundant toilet at Worcester Foregate Street being turned into a modern art gallery
- a community-based radio station with studios, training base, internet café and meeting room is planned for Spalding
- 10 starter units for small businesses are proposed at Sleaford
- Welland Enterprise, housed at Stamford, provides free business support to small businesses, including social enterprise
- station buildings at Great Malvern have been renovated by Malvern Social Education Centre to create a craft shop and training base for the Centre's users with learning issues
- a music space; a base for supporting new social enterprise; a community enterprise café and a training base to support people with learning issues are planned for Melton Mowbray



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involvement and awareness, particularly at unstaffed stations,” said Mike Haigh, Central Trains business development director.

Having set out to regenerate community space in 12 stations in the West and East Midlands, the project is due to complete the leases on 22 spaces created through the initiative.

### LONG-TERM SECURITY

Already renovated and occupied, Oakham station is providing StudentForce with a range of space including the former stationmaster’s house. The charity advises and trains graduates and other young people in economic, social and environmental self-sufficiency and encourages them to change their lifestyles in the face of global warming.

With a 25-year lease, StudentForce (which has 15 staff and about 100 volunteers) has made a considerable investment in the premises and has attracted grants and funding for a base from which it is promoting sustainable development by recruiting, training and supporting young people as graduates on placement, students, volunteers and entrepreneurs.

Adam Cade is chief executive. “Moving to the station is really good,” he explained. “It practises what we preach. Not many young people have cars: staff can come to their place of work by train and young people can come in for training by train.

“It will provide our charity with the long-term security that is so needed in the voluntary sector in return for our obvious presence at the station and commitment for maintenance. The initial restoration costs are far outweighed by the benefits of in-kind contributions of long-term premises at a peppercorn rent,” he said.

### THE MODEL

Oakham’s level crossing signal box was made famous from the 1950s on as the prototype for a popular Airfix model. Now Oakham, and the other stations in the initiative are the model for what could spread nationwide.

“Network Rail has welcomed the initiative,” said Jerry Swift, Network Rail’s account director for Community Rail. “We and Central Trains recognised some time ago there was a need to find a use for those railway properties which were not generally attractive on a commercial basis.”

One of the main aims of the pilot has been to develop a standard, low-cost process which can be applied to these buildings – and used as a template for future use.

“We have learned a lot from the early part of this project, and future lettings will now benefit from that experience,” explained Jerry. “Network Rail believes that this project shows how the industry can work co-operatively to benefit the wider community.” ■

