

RPSI 2020 Committee
“Future Opportunities and Challenges” Conference
16th January 2010

The Society's 2020 Committee held a conference in the Irish Linen Centre in Lisburn on Saturday 16th January to inform the RPSI Council and other Society office-holders - principally PSRs - of various major developments being planned for the future, and their progress to date.

The Committee was assisted by three external advisors with whom they had been working. These were Ken Nelson of LEDCOM (Larne Economic Development Co.), and Helen Keys and Kevin McCaughan who are the Consultants who prepared major Audience & Access and Training Reports for the Society (essential submission documents for further external funding) as part of the Society's Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) Project Planning Grant.

The RPSI 2020 Committee comprises Johnny Glendinning, Denis Grimshaw, Brian King, John Lockett, Robin Mowbray and Derek Young. The Committee was set up in 2005 to seek grant funding, and then to manage the provision of information to our HLF Consultants and to co-ordinate the production of the resultant reports to Council and members. The Committee remains in place, with an expanded membership, to progress the development of Society facilities based on the contents of the Consultants' reports and subsequent grant funding.

The conference was opened by Johnny Glendinning, who welcomed those present and explained the purpose of the meeting - to outline the planning progress made to date and the views of the 2020 Committee as to the way forward in the future. Whilst all decisions will of course be made by the RPSI Council as and when appropriate, it was felt that it would be sensible to consult a wider range of Society office-holders at this stage as a sense-check that we are at least heading in the right direction.

Johnny then listed the numerous grants which the RPSI had received over the years, in exchange for which the Society had made commitments for training, conservation, education and access. Many of the plans outlined at the conference would be in direct support of these commitments.

Derek Young then set the scene for the rationale behind the work of the 2020 Committee, by critically examining our current facilities and resources, and the areas where these may be inadequate or unsatisfactory for the long-term development of our activities.

John Lockett took up this theme by describing the current Whitehead site as visitors and other non-members might see it - devoid of almost any form of public (including RPSI train passenger) reception, shelter, catering, shopping or toilet facilities - as would be universal at nearly any other preserved railway centre or similar attraction elsewhere. Furthermore, unkempt vegetation, derelict fencing, and some items of unrestored rolling-stock could add to the suggestion of a scrap yard to unsympathetic locals or visitors - undermining the enormous amount of superb restoration and maintenance work done elsewhere on the premises.

John then highlighted what the Society proposed to do to address this, with plans prepared for the building of an authentic NCC station building (externally modelled on the former Whiteabbey station designed by Charles Lanyon), to house a reception area cum booking hall, café, shop, toilets and an office, together with a platform canopy. Furthermore, although still subject to further assessment, significant funding for the building has been provisionally offered by GROW (“Generating Rural Opportunities Within” South Antrim). On this basis, the Society has now applied for Planning Permission.

Helen Keys highlighted the opportunities and benefits of the RPSI setting up subsidiary “Not-for-Profit” companies to maximise access to other external advice, support, grants and other funding. Two NFP Companies could be created within RPSI to cover Engineering and Event Management. This would allow the commercial development of these functions without any commercial risk to the Society's core preservation activities. Income from the NFP companies would be returned to the Society to help the funding of its mainstream activities.

Ken Nelson took over to explain the SEP (Social Entrepreneurship Programme) being promoted by the UK Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, to support local community enterprises and developments, which may be applicable to some activities undertaken at Whitehead.

The HLF “Skills for the Future” grant scheme was outlined by Kevin McCaughan, with particular reference to the restoration, manufacturing and maintenance work undertaken by the Society on heritage vehicles and components such as locomotive boilers and fireboxes, using skills no longer in general use today.

After a short refreshment break, David Houston and David Humphries took over to explain the urgent challenges facing the Society in the Dublin Area to find and develop an operational depot and storage area for the Dublin-based locomotives and carriages, for which Iarnród Éireann will no longer have storage space at Inchicore once construction work starts on the Dublin Interconnector Railway which will occupy a significant proportion of the Inchicore Works site. A number of options are currently being investigated and their access and funding requirements assessed, which may impose substantial funding challenges on the Society, but could also present new opportunities through the use of our own premises. Discussions have been arranged with the CIÉ Property Department, to discuss possible options.

A possible major development at Magheramorne, just five miles beyond Whitehead on the Larne Line, was outlined by Johnny Glendinning. This was a proposal for a heritage railway station and a 114 mile operating line on the reclaimed land on the seaward side of the railway, part-financed by Lafarge, as the developer and owner of the former adjacent quarry. Once again, this could present both a major opportunity and a major challenge to the Society. In the meantime, NIR have agreed to maintain the existing turnout at Magheramorne loop.

The conference concluded with a general discussion forum, involving a substantial proportion of those present, with agreement on the direction and actions being taken by the 2020 Project Group. In particular, the view of the meeting was that a similar Project Group should be established, with a degree of urgency, to progress the acquisition and development of an operational site in the greater Dublin area.