



Karen Booth, pictured (left) at the opening of the restored Irlam station

# ‘We could be doing so much more’

**Karen Booth** believes it’s time for the railway to rethink its approach to working with communities - and go much further



**James Dark**  
Associate Editor

► In many respects, the railway touches communities like no other industry. It runs through towns, cities and villages across the nation, covers areas of high deprivation and extreme wealth, and in many cases provides public transport where no other option exists. Train operators are often among the largest employers in their region.

It’s a position the government has been increasingly keen to tap into, challenging

operators to extend their horizons beyond train services and passengers to how the railway can support local businesses, create new opportunities for residents and contribute to more fulfilling lifestyles.

On the face of it, new franchise awards have brought notable changes. Free tickets for job seekers are now standard fare, along with commitments to open up disused station buildings for community use, increase apprenticeships, and provide opportunities for SMEs to bid for railway contracts. Tens of millions of pounds in extra funding have been

made available for community rail partnerships and for pots that community groups can bid for.

Ministers are keen to capitalise on progress, highlighting such initiatives in media appearances. But how far are things really changing?

Rather than being symptomatic of a new approach to railway management, Karen Booth, a partner in sustainability consultancy Eracura, views the new social initiatives operators are promising as little more than an extension of existing practices. “When I see it all over Twitter that operators are offering free travel for jobseekers, I think is that all? Is that really new thinking?” she questions.

It’s not that Booth, who created an industry-leading environmental and sustainability strategy at Northern Rail a decade ago and developed it year after year, thinks it’s the wrong thing to do or does not recognise change is taking place. Instead she argues that “there’s so much more we could be doing”.

“Historically, as an industry, we have thought about how we engage with communities at a fairly basic level,” she says. “We might help community groups by giving them money - perhaps sponsorship, or we get excited about developing a supply chain that actually welcomes bids from social enterprises and SMEs - but how many contracts do they win? At another level, some TOCs are starting to say they will provide a degree of mentoring or use of premises - genuinely helping them. But beyond that the next layer is true partnership with communities and community organisations which we don’t really do.”

What the rail industry currently views as partnership working with community groups isn’t really partnership at all, she explains. It’s usually one-way with companies deciding what they can offer rather than researching what communities need. There is a risk that initiatives tend to be ad-hoc and driven by individual managers who have a ‘bright idea’ rather than forming part of the day-to-day business. This is where she says a different, more strategic, perspective can deliver real change, benefiting the railway and society.

For example, at a low level, it could mean forming a partnership with a car club operator to market car sharing jointly rather than simply providing spaces in a station car park. Or it might mean researching local demographics and working with community service providers



to understand the facilities people most need when opening up redundant station property, rather than letting space for a café. Building a 'railway mates network' could provide assistance to passengers, for example shelter in churches or pubs for passengers in rural areas if they miss the last train or have a long wait.

At a larger level, she points to numerous national and regional organisations that operators could work with for mutual benefit. For example, joint projects with charities working with disadvantaged young people could provide a ready source of potential apprentices or participants in railway skills development programmes. Partnerships with regional social enterprise bodies could help operators assess the business benefits of diversifying their supply chain and help alternative service providers understand how to compete for railway contracts.

Partnerships with organisations that help people back to work could raise awareness among jobseekers of how the railway can expand their employment opportunities, increasing social opportunity and railway patronage. "A lot of these people don't even realise where the railway goes or even know where the local station is, so their work horizons are limited," Booth says. "It's a different dimension to accessibility from meeting a legal obligation to improve facilities for disabled people."

At present, she sees operators as some way off understanding how to take community partnerships to this level.

"Mention sustainability and for 99% the first thought is that you're talking about the environment and second that it's a separate thing. They don't see that it's a social and economic business practice that rolls into and affects every aspect of the company," she says.

So what's the justification for operators to invest in the necessary management time, culture change and knowledge development, along with community engagement managers to co-ordinate such activities? Booth adopts a patient look as if it's the sort of question she's been asked to explain many times throughout her career.

Looking back to her experience at Northern, she sees some parallels in her initial difficulties in gaining buy-in from colleagues and Network Rail for investment in projects such as energy efficient lighting and efficient fuel



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**Karen Booth**

use. They were pioneering on the railway at the time but have since become accepted as standard, good business practice, saving money and reducing environmental impact.

"It did take a lot of discussion about how to build it into a business model because people couldn't necessarily see the immediate benefits," she says. "It didn't feel like it back then, but I'd say now that the environmental side was a slightly easier sell because it's not so brand new to people as talking about these concepts of sustainability and building social capital is today. We'd been through the hippy-dippy, dreary sandal-wearer phase and people were starting to make choices about recycling and being sensible about using fuel in their own life. So there was some personal awareness in the company.

"It's also slightly harder on the social side because the business cases may be longer term and harder to see. So it's about mapping the community organisations out there, and then developing a strategy to identify which ones to work with that can help with company and

social priorities, and measuring the impact - whether skills development, a more secure railway, the number of people you've helped find work, some extra revenue or whatever. There are so many possibilities."

As with the industry's early development of environmental initiatives, Booth does not necessarily expect change to come quickly. Although some advances were included in Transport Scotland's requirements for the new ScotRail contract, she is particularly doubtful whether Department for Transport franchise specifications will set the tone. She points out that sustainability proposals typically account for less than 2% of the quality rating when the DfT assesses rival franchise bids and that, unlike operational commitments, companies don't face any penalties if they are not delivered. Inevitably, it means social initiatives are likely to be lower priority, small scale and isolated projects when companies start implementing their bid plans.

Instead she expects action to come from changes in society and people's expectations of public services raising railway managers' awareness of the opportunities.

"Politically, the country's getting into the bigger debate around regionalism and devolution, the idea that people have a louder voice, and it's rising all the time," she says. "I think we will see more and more local groups and organisations interested in different aspects of community economic and social development and there will be expectations that the railway understands who they are and thinks about how to work with them."

With sufficient scale and commitment, she believes the benefits could multiply beyond any gains from individual projects to strengthening the railway's reputation and helping to build consumer trust in an industry which receives below average ratings.

If that sounds a big prize, Booth counters that it shouldn't be a surprising revelation. "If you don't have a fair, equitable society why have a railway, or exist at all?" she asks. "It's even more important than the environmental agenda because that's just part of it. It's about how we act and the support we give to our fellow citizens and their communities. You can have as many dandelions as you want but what's the point if you're not contributing to a stronger society?" ■

