



DARTMOOR RAILWAY SUPPORTERS' ASSOCIATION

PRESS RELEASE

When the Dartmoor Railway Community Interest Company went into administration in February 2020, resulting in the closure of Okehampton Station, the Dartmoor Railway Supporters' Association moved quickly to establish a daily rota of station security patrols. This soon became lockdown exercise, restricted to very local volunteers. As the Covid-19 restrictions relaxed, other activities became possible. Volunteers have worked hard this summer painting, gardening and repairing, and the station now looks as good as ever, and ready for the next phase of its existence.

We have been hugely encouraged to observe that the railway has also been the centre of attention for engineers from Network Rail, franchisee Great Western Railway, and several of their subcontractors. They have been assessing Okehampton station, and the Aggregate Industries-owned railway line from Coleford Junction to Meldon Quarry, with a view to reinstating a regular daily service between Okehampton and Exeter.

In the last few months a succession of engineers has studied all aspects of the railway, ranging from drainage, to bats, to installation issues for security cameras and information terminals. There has even been a drone survey. Interestingly, some of this work was on the Meldon side of Okehampton. DRSA has been pleased to facilitate the work, providing information and, where possible, access, for these workers.

Many of the NR and GWR engineers have been pleasantly surprised by the quality of Okehampton station. Following the station's sympathetic restoration by Devon County Council and others in the 1990s, its renowned 1950s/60s ambience has subsequently been carefully maintained by DRSA volunteers. With Okehampton's railway approaching its 150th anniversary, it has been heartening to hear NR undertake to respect the station's heritage in the future.

Although NR and GWR are enthusiastic about the project, ultimately the decision to go ahead with reinstatement lies with the government, and the purpose of the current activity is to provide costings to inform this decision. We understand that the survey report will be submitted shortly, with a decision hoped for in a matter of months.

Frustratingly, the DRCIC administration process remains incomplete. Some rooms on Okehampton Station weren't unlocked until mid-October, prior to which essential access had been denied to Network Rail's surveyors, as well as the station's owner, Devon County Council. The two dozen or so rail vehicles which comprise DRCIC's assets remain on site. None is fit to travel on the national network, so they need to leave by road. With no suitable access at Okehampton, the 'Christmas Train' and several other vehicles first have to be moved to Meldon Quarry for onward road transport. A number of rumoured removal dates have already come and gone.

Although DRSA was originally formed to support heritage rail services on the Dartmoor Railway, a secondary objective was always support for regular rail services for Okehampton and the surrounding communities. The focus of our current activities is to maintain Okehampton's historic station, and to support its rail services, which we hope will recommence in the near future. We are assessing organisational restructuring to equip us better to meet this commitment. Nevertheless, the operation of heritage services to Meldon remains a long term aspiration.

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