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| Subject: | Volk's Railway Potential Improvements | | |
| Date of Meeting: | 17th June 2021 | | |
| Report of: | Executive Director, Economy, Environment & Culture | | |
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| Ward(s) affected: | East Brighton, Queen's Park, Rottingdean Coastal | | |

FOR GENERAL RELEASE

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT AND POLICY CONTEXT

- 1.1 At the meeting of the TECC Committee in November 2020 a notice of motion was presented regarding potential improvements to the Volk's Railway. In response to the notice of motion the committee requested an officer report to a future meeting and this report considers the potential improvements previously suggested.
- 1.2 The Volk's Railway is a much-loved visitor attraction which is the oldest operating electric railway in the world. The railway attracted around 75,000 visitors per year (pre pandemic) and operates between May and September. Four full time staff are employed by the Council and during the summer season an additional seven full time equivalent jobs are created.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 2.1 That the Committee agrees as a priority the progression of the project to achieve a new accessible railcar, including a costed design and the identification of full funding for the project.
- 2.2 That the Committee agrees to £30,000 of the funding of £40,000 previously identified for signage, a new shelter and siding is instead allocated to a new accessible railcar.
- 2.3 That the Committee notes that consideration to extend the railway to Black Rock will be given during the development of the Eastern Seafront Masterplan.
- 2.4 That the Committee notes the uncertainty of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the future operation of the railway, and that the financial viability of future improvements would need to be given careful consideration to ensure the viability of the Volk's Railway is sustainable.

3. CONTEXT/ BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- 3.1 The Volk's Railway is a heritage railway visitor attraction, which operates during the summer months to transport members of the public from the Aquarium to Black Rock along Madeira Drive. As a consequence, the railway has to operate to meet the requirements of Her Majesty's Railway Inspectorate (HMRI).
- 3.2 The responsibility to meet these requirements rests with the very experienced and professionally qualified small Volk's Team, which is supplemented by seasonal drivers and ticket office staff to enable the railway to operate each year.
- 3.3 The railway has benefitted greatly from the improvements that the council undertook in recent years to replace the former siding sheds with new Conservation Workshops, a new Aquarium Station and Visitor Centre, together with the restoration of a railcar. All of these improvements have enabled an enhanced educational programme and prior to the lockdown increased usage. These improvements were primarily funded by a grant of £1.65M from the National Lottery Heritage Fund.
- 3.4 The railway receives welcome support from the enthusiasts of the Volk's Electric Railway Association (VERA), who regularly assist with winter maintenance tasks under the supervision of council staff, together with the operation of occasional evening services over the summer period.
- 3.5 At the meeting of the TECC Committee in November 2020 a notice of motion was presented and the following agreed:
- To thank Volk's Electric Railway Association for the proposal document 'An Accessible Future for Volk's Electric Railway'; (see Appendix 1)
 - To note the potential positive implications for inclusivity, the tourist economy and community wealth building of successfully expanding, updating and improving accessibility to Volk's Electric Railway
 - To call for an Officer Report exploring how these proposals could be considered alongside existing planned works at Black Rock and Madeira Terraces, and be complementary to them; and
 - Notes that due to the Covid-19 pandemic councils across the country are in a difficult financial position and that this council's financial opportunities are just as limited. Committee therefore requests the report also explores options for funding the proposals through external funding, such as the Heritage Lottery Fund, or S106/CiL money.
- 3.6 The council's budget for 2021/22 approved the following funding:
- Volk's Disabled Access Carriage - £100,00
 - Volk's Railway, signage, siding and shelter - £40,000

POTENTIAL IMPROVEMENTS TO THE VOLK'S RAILWAY

- 3.7 The following potential improvements highlighted in the VERA report An Accessible Future for Volk's Electric Railway have been reviewed by the experienced council staff who have the appropriate professional technical qualifications necessary to operate the railway. Where appropriate, further advice has been sought in order to give ideas appropriate consideration.

New Accessible Railcar

- 3.8 The proposal of a new accessible railcar is considered to be the highest priority needed to improve the Volk's Railway. In addition to the very important accessibility issues that this proposal would address, the railway also loses valuable revenue throughout the year when the service has to stop because of inclement weather (the downtime in 2020 was equal to 14 full days revenue). A railcar that can operate in wind and rain would eliminate the times where the railway cannot operate. This would assist with revenue generation through a more reliable service for passengers.
- 3.9 There are considered to be two potential options in relation to a new accessible railcar. The first option, as identified in the VERA report has a budget estimated cost in the region of £500,000 (see p x in Appendix 1).
- 3.10 In order to develop this proposal, consideration would need to be given to new safety and evacuation measures that would need to be implemented on the railway. Any additional expenditure from these requirements would need to be included in the total build figure for this car.
- 3.11 In addition, the revenue cost of the long-term servicing and maintenance of this railcar would need to be factored into the overall cost of the project. The railcar would have technologies and features that are new to the railway, the implications of which would need to be fully costed into the project.
- 3.12 There is the potential second option which is a shorter car which has an estimated budget estimated cost in the region of £300,000. Both options are therefore a significant cost, and it is proposed that the options are fully designed and costed to give certainty to the extent of the funding that is required.
- 3.13 As already indicated, there is a budget allocation of £100,000 towards this project which will be used to support the cost of designing both options for an accessible railcar.

New Signage

- 3.14 Signage on the gable ends of the new Aquarium Station is unfortunately not as straightforward as would first appear. The membrane surface that covers the external cladding of the station is not suitable to be drilled into to fix lettering or other signage. This was an issue which the architects of the NHLF Project sought to address, but a technical solution which would not compromise the integrity of the building wall could not be identified. A professional signage company have been contacted who declined to provide a sign or lettering to fix to the station due to the concern of damaging the waterproof membrane.

- 3.15 A range of other options have been considered including using banners, but they are problematic and wear quickly in a seafront location. Also, vinyl lettering would not stick permanently to the membrane covering of the station.
- 3.16 The Volk's Railway are therefore looking to improve the existing marketing of the attraction, particularly through on-line advertising to increase awareness and attract more users. In addition, greater use of "teardrop banners" and the replacement of the flagpole adjacent to the station will also be employed to increase the visibility of the station. It is therefore proposed to utilise £10,000 of the additional funding of £40,000 to make these improvements.

Providing Shelter at the Halfway Station

- 3.17 The provision of a new shelter has been considered at the Halfway Station. Options have been investigated and there is a real challenge to identify a suitable space on the existing small platform at the station. In addition, designs that are appropriate for a heritage railway have a significant cost.
- 3.18 A budget cost to provide a new heritage kiosk with ancillary seating is in the region of £30,000. Therefore, as the accessible railcar is considered the main priority, it is recommended the funding allocated for this improvement is transferred to the railcar project.

Restoring the Aquarium Station North Siding

- 3.19 The Volk's staff have reviewed this proposal and consider that the cost of restoring the North Siding would far exceed that suggested in the VERA report. The cost to re-establish a second line is in excess of the £25,000 quoted in the VERA report and more likely to be circa £500,000. A breakdown is as follows:

South Side

- Moving of current steel beams and installation of new ones. Ground levelling around the southside area. Current track moved southwards. COST: £100,000
- Erection/labour of above beams and groundwork south side. COST: £40,000
- Building and erection of double-tracked bridge. COST: £30,000
- Fixing of railway track, catch rail, walkway, and points to steel sleepers and live line, station to level ground to include scaffolding & Labour. COST: £20,000
- Track Materials (running line, catch rail, walkway, live line, fish plates) from Aquarium Station to new level ground. COST: £30,000
- Purchase and laying of Points/switch. COST: £15,000
- Electronic Signal system to operate the switch points at the points and in the building. COST: £80,000
- CAD designer and structural engineer costs plus ORR approval process. COST: £10,000 to £15,000
- Planning and ecological reports. COST: £300
- Widen concrete platform base to south and east of station to accommodate central barrier. COST: £15,000

North Side

- New Gantry steels on the old north track back to level ground. COST: £80,000
- Labour to fix North side steels. COST: £20,000
- New rail and fixings north track. COST: £20,000
- New buffer for second line. COST: £5,000
- Barriers down centre platform plus gates and fencing to south side. COST: £20,000
- Make good the south beach pavement and detour walking route. COST: £15,000

Total Estimated Budget Cost to restore the Aquarium North Siding: £515,000

- 3.20 As a consequence of the level of the estimated total cost for this work, it is recommended that the accessible railcar is prioritised as an improvement, with £30,000 of the £40,000 of funding previously allocated for signage, a new shelter and siding being transferred to the project to provide a new accessible railcar to give a greater chance of that project being achieved.

Extending the railway at Black Rock

- 3.21 The proposal by VERA to extend the railway across the Black Rock site needs to be given very careful consideration. The current Enabling Works being progressed provide a new and level access to accommodate a future transit link in the form of an electric bus or similar which can transport people – in volume numbers if necessary. How an extended heritage link would complement this or add to the potential for transit along the seafront will need to be considered as part of the future Development Brief for the Black Rock site, which will guide development. Whilst the Volks Railway is a treasured attraction, it is also true that electrification along a long stretch of public realm is prone to create a dissection of the public realm and therefore an extension of the railway needs to be considered within this context as well. The current Enabling Works are delivering improvements to the five crossing points from the Volk's Conservation Workshops to the Black Rock Station.
- 3.22 To improve the possibility of the Black Rock site becoming a future destination in its own right a planning permission was received in June 2020, which agreed to an extension of the site southwards to create a developable area and to rebuild the seawall further south, creating a new promenade space. Therefore, placing an extension to the railway directly through the site, even in part, tends to dissect the land that is needed to support future development (and amenity space around a future development). It would possibly also undermine the reasoning behind loss of the Local Wildlife Site. The site is being relocated with the agreement of the Planning Committee and the County Ecologist, and this was agreed in order to allow the Black Rock site to be extended and the new sea wall to be erected in advance of redevelopment.
- 3.23 The proposed extension to the line would involve electrification which would take up a strip of land across the site with a width of approximately 4-5m. This would inhibit movement across the site and has the potential to have a significant negative impact on the links into and out of the Marina which would be important

to the future development of the site. Therefore, the advantages and disadvantages of any extension in this location would need to be carefully assessed before any decision was made.

- 3.24 Work will also commence shortly on an Eastern Seafront Masterplan and the relationship of the Black Rock site to the Marina and the wider Eastern Seafront will be key considerations in that process. VERA will be included as a consultee, along with local businesses and a range of other key stakeholders, in the development of the Masterplan.

4. ANALYSIS & CONSIDERATION OF ANY ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

- 4.1 The options for potential improvements for the Volk's Railway have been considered in the body of the report. The Volk's Railway staff are constantly seeking to improve the railway as part of the day to day operation of the attraction.

5. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT & CONSULTATION

- 5.1 The council works in close collaboration with VERA on an on-going basis. This report has been discussed with Peter Williams, Chairman of VERA and co-author of the proposals in Appendix 1. Mr Williams supports the recommendation to prioritise the provision of a new accessible railcar, and to utilise most of the available resources for that project.

6. CONCLUSION

- 6.1 The provision of a new accessible railcar for the Volk's Railway is considered the priority of the proposed improvements. Therefore, it is recommended that the additional budget allocated for the Volk's Railway in 21/22 is prioritised for that project to give it the greatest opportunity to be achieved.

7. FINANCIAL & OTHER IMPLICATIONS:

Financial Implications:

- 7.1 Budget Council, in February 2021 allocated £0.140m capital investment for the Volks Railway. The recommendation is to prioritise most of these resources to a new accessible railcar. The estimated cost of a new accessible railcar is between £0.300m to £0.500m and therefore further funding will need to be identified before this project can be implemented.

Finance Officer Consulted: James Hengeveld

Date: 24/05/21

Legal Implications:

- 7.2 If the project to provide a new accessible railcar proceeds it will need to be procured in accordance with the Council's Contract Standing Orders and the procurement regulations. The action proposed is in line with the Council's duty to remove or minimise disadvantages suffered by people due to their protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010.

Lawyer Consulted:

Alice Rowland

Date: 21/05/21

Equalities Implications:

- 7.3 The addition of an accessible rail car would greatly enhance the inclusivity of the provision which is a challenge for a heritage railway with the design of the existing carriages.

Sustainability Implications:

- 7.4 The sustainability implications of a new accessible railcar would be given due consideration in the detailed design.

Brexit Implications:

- 7.5 There are no implications identified.

Public Health Implications:

- 7.6 Visitor attractions can have a positive impact on the health and well-being of users, especially those such as the Volk's Railway which are all part of the experience of a coastal resort.

SUPPORTING DOCUMENTATION

Appendices:

1. 'An Accessible Future for Volk's Electric Railway'

Background Documents

1. None

