

PROJECT REPORT

2020 | NOVEMBER

VIRTUAL EDUCATION NETWORK

Lead: Karen Bennett, Education Development Officer

CONCEPT & AIMS

Community Rail Lancashire (CRL) has hosted Education Network Meetings since early 2018 as part of its commitment with Northern to support other Community Rail Partnerships in the region with education in rail. Prior to Covid-19 striking, meetings were held in locations such as Preston, Haltwhistle and Accrington and focused on educational engagement in Community Rail, Autism and Deaf awareness and a thought-provoking course on managing suicidal contacts by the Samaritans. Most attendees of these meetings were from partnerships across Northern's network or from other local organisations and TOCs. When the lockdown hit in March 2020, CRL's Education Development Officer Karen Bennett decided to chair online Education Network meetings instead so that officers would have a sense of togetherness in a time when many of them were alone.



WHAT HAPPENED

The meetings were held fortnightly and then as restrictions began to ease, meetings switched to monthly (the third Thursday of the month) and have been planned to last, at least, to the end of 2020 – with 100% of attendees agreeing that they should continue into 2021 and even after the pandemic has ended.

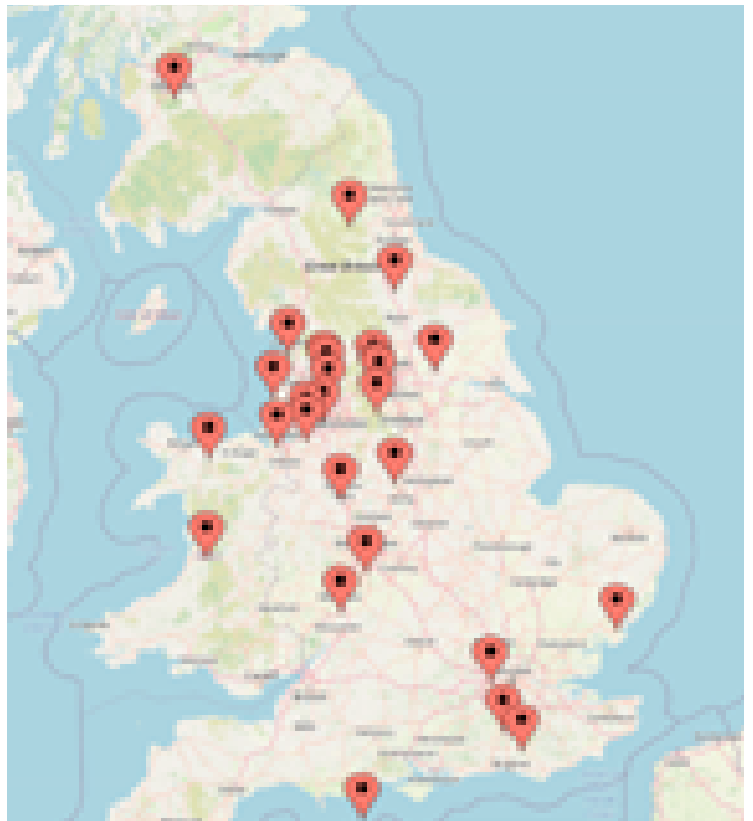
To begin with, meetings were attended by the same officers who attended the old-style meetings in the North, but then the Community Rail Network posted details inviting officers from across the UK on the 21st April 2020 to join the meetings. Since then, there has been a wide geographical spread of attendees, ranging from Glasgow, Llandudno, London, Worcestershire, Lancashire, Yorkshire, and the North East. Attendees are from Community Rail Partnerships, TOCs, Station Adoption Groups, Network Rail and the Community Rail Network.

At the beginning of lockdown, the focus of the conversation was mainly mental health and working at home, but then colleagues learnt about Worcestershire's Stitch Train Project and Northern's collaboration with the English Football League and National Citizen Service.

They also received training on using online design programme Canva and how to manage social media planning – courtesy of Felicity Machnicki from the Bishopton CRP. Each of the early sessions featured a coffee-break chat with another officer, so everyone had the chance to talk about their week with a friendly voice. As time progressed, delegates used the 'breakout rooms' function to have small group conversations.

To support officers' virtual engagement with schools, a steering group formed to create work packs for primary and secondary schools and in May, Dawn Sweeting, Community Safety Manager at Network Rail attended a meeting to ask the group

for help to combat the spike of trespassing incidents during lockdown. A working party was set up with officers from Tyne Valley CRP, the Bishopton CRP, Southeastern CRP and Community Rail Lancashire to create a competition to support the reduction of trespassing and so '**Backtrack: Create it, Share it, Save Lives**' was formed.



BACKTRACK



CREATE IT, SHARE IT, SAVE LIVES

RESULTS

Participants of the meetings have asked for them to continue into 2021 and even when the world returns to a relative normal as they enable colleagues from across the country to come together to share ideas, work collaboratively on projects and support each other on a social level. Attendees said the most useful parts of the monthly meets were learning about projects, sharing ideas and networking. One delegate said that the meetings, **“are a great way to meet other CRP officers and build relations. A very useful way to work collaboratively and share ideas”**. Another added that they are, **“very glad to be part of them as being a solo officer can be quite isolating”**. For a new and inexperienced officer, the zoom gatherings offer a change for them to get to know **“others whose experiences are the same as mine and who can offer advice and support”**.

The Backtrack Competition will run again in 2021, after success during the pandemic. TOCs such as Northern, LNER and Cross Country and a number of CRPs sponsored six main prizes. The competition was engaged by thousands of people on social media and made it onto several radio shows and in addition got into local and rail printed press.

SUMMARY

The Virtual Education Network has demonstrated that stakeholders from Community Rail Partnerships, TOCs, Network Rail, Station adopters and other colleagues can come together from across the country and work together during difficult times. There are plans to re-start the physical meetings again when restrictions are eased but there is no reason why the online model cannot be continued in addition, when staff are no longer working at home.

LINKS

www.downtheline.org.uk/projects/workpacks

www.downtheline.org.uk/projects/backtrack

www.youtube.com/watch?v=gFmnTmDO8DA