

To receive an update on Isambard House Concessionaire and consider any actions and associated expenditure

Overview

Part of the decision to buy and refurbish Isambard house was a desire to provide improved passenger facilities for rail travellers passing through Saltash station. A significant portion of the funding for this building refurbishment project came from Cornwall Council with some of this allocated from Local Transport Plan funding to specifically improve passenger facilities. It is therefore incumbent on STC to deliver these improved facilities in line with the funding agreement.

It is therefore important for STC to open the passenger facilities, not only to comply with the CC funding agreement, but also to deliver what we said we would for the residents of Saltash. The position of CC throughout the refurbishment and since is that STC should open when they are able, and CC are content to wait if there is an intent to open the passenger facilities at some point.

Challenges

There have been several challenges in getting the passenger facilities open. The Covid pandemic had considerable impact on the number of passengers using the railway across the country with travelling habits undergoing significant changes. This is proving to be a significant challenge for rail companies who have seen a shift away from peak time travel as people work more from home. The last year has also seen a number of industrial disputes between various bodies that has resulted in significant days with no rail operations anywhere in Cornwall. Rail unions must give 14 days notice for strike action and this uncertainty has put off potential café operators looking to start a new business.

Inevitably the disputes will be resolved and a 'normal' service will resume, but this does not seem imminent. The picture regarding passenger footfall looks much better, with Saltash numbers recovering well post pandemic, and the ORR footfall data shows a 140% change from pre pandemic levels, one of the most healthy across Cornwall. The introduction of a better timetable with a number of key additional calls at Saltash such as the 06.37 weekday service to Paddington has no doubt had a positive impact on footfall alongside a clear message that Saltash cares about its station. The Town Council should be proud of what it has achieved and the associated investment from partners in improved footpaths, lighting and bollards that make using the station easier and safer.

The upward trend in footfall is predicted to continue and the rail companies have acknowledged Saltash as a strong performer in terms of increased footfall and therefore business.

Potential Café operators

The Town Council agreed to enter into an agreement with Zinns Coffee to operate the café and waiting room at Isambard House. Unfortunately, in late July it became apparent that this was unlikely to progress as all communication from them ceased despite officer and member attempts to communicate with them.

At a similar time, a good alternative prospect became known, the Cornish Rail Coffee Company, based in Bodmin, and currently operating railway station cafes at Bodmin General (on the Bodmin and Wenford Railway), as well as Bodmin Parkway and Liskeard stations, both mainline locations. The Cornish Rail Coffee Company were formed to support and generate revenue for the heritage Bodmin and Wenford Railway, with the café at Bodmin General being their first and main venue.

Communication was established and their Business Manager visited Saltash for initial talks on the possibility of them adding Saltash to their growing portfolio. The meeting took place on the 18th July and was positive. The Business Manager prepared a report for their board that included positive communication with senior staff at GWR in relation to footfall figures at Saltash. The board of directors of the Cornish Rail Coffee Company discussed the possibility of taking on Saltash at their August board meeting, and we received the following on the 20th August:

“The Board are in favour of Saltash- however they feel that we can really only move forward on this from next March !

When we are more financially sound and have got through the winter closed period.

I would have liked to have moved quicker but have to be led by them.

If you haven't found a tenant in this time, then we would like to take you up on the offer in the new year.”

The café at Bodmin General does close during the winter period, and whilst they plan to keep the mainline cafes open, it seems clear that they feel it is too much for them to do anything before early next year.

We have since received the following on the 13th September:

“I have just had a quick chat with David Nelson Brown - MD, and he said that it was agreed at the Board Meeting that we would be looking to take on Saltash, from March 2024 onwards.

The properties at the moment are getting Penzance fitted out and put into location for Oct/Nov.

We would then have Christmas “ Santa trains here at Bodmin General to deal with, so we can then focus on Saltash in the new financial year – Feb 2024 onwards.

We of course, fully understand if you do get a tenant before this time, we would lose the opportunity, however we are keen to work with the Town Council to make this location a success but need to delay until 2024.

I will of course stay in touch with you, and keep you updated, if you could do the same for me”.

Current situation

Therefore, at present we do not have short term interest in taking on the café and waiting room at Isambard House, but have a positive long term option.

Possible Options

There is probably an infinite number of options, the below list provides a starting point for members to consider.

- 1 Wait until CRCC (Cornish Rail Coffee Company) are able to open in early 2024
- 2 Open unmanned
- 3 Open and have a SDGA on site
- 4 Recruit and appoint a new member of staff to operate the café for STC
- 5 Re-advertise for 'Expressions of Interest' to operate the café
- 6 Open on a limited basis using volunteers

Option 1

The Cornish Rail Coffee Company have stated that they would like to take this on from March 2024 should it still be available. They have a good track record of operating station cafes (Bodmin General, Bodmin Parkway, Liskeard and Penzance)and wish to expand, but at at their pace.

Option 2

Would enable the waiting room and accessible toilet to be available quickly, but not a café operation. The space could be subject to abuse and vandalism. The space may benefit from a CCTV install, but without active monitoring the space could still be vulnerable. A timer lock can be used to open, but is not as secure as physical locks. The space would still require Service Delivery team visits to check, clean and probably engage the physical locks. The alarm system would need to be disabled or amended for the waiting room and toilet if the automatic locking is utilised.

Please see note at foot of report from the Town Clerk regarding insurance implications.

Option 3

Comes at a financial cost to STC and SDGA resources are already limited. The SDGA could be utilised to carry out other works on site. At present the early SDGA shift starts at 08.00, after many of the busiest morning trains have departed.

Option 4

STC could appoint a new member of staff tasked with opening and operating the waiting room and café. The site would be secure and would not require additional SDGA support in normal operation. The staff member could be utilised to carry out other tasks on the site such as room setup and hirer handovers. Any profit from the café operation would come to STC. Staff absences would need to be covered or the facility closed for that period.

NB. Possible Growth Hub funding for any equipment required as we would be creating additional employment.

Option 5

STC could readvertise to try to find an alternative café operator.

Option 6

In the past a number of volunteers did show interest. Further investigations could be done to try to find volunteers willing to open, close the facilities and possibly operate the café. This would provide some protection for the space, but STC may need to provide some equipment and training. Café profits could come to STC or be used to support local charities and organisations dependent on volunteers.

Other considerations:

Advice from the Town Clerk/RFO:

There are several issues with opening Isambard House waiting room and fully accessible toilet unmanned and potential problems for the Town Council. Under the insurance policy there is a section - The Reasonable Precautions Clause which reads as below:

3. Reasonable Precautions

The insured will comply with all regulations imposed by any competent authority and take all reasonable precautions to prevent or minimise accident, injury, loss or damage. In addition, the insured will comply with makers recommendations made in respect of plant and machinery wherever reasonably practicable.

Leaving a Town Council building open and unmanned has many potential problems and by going with the policy outlined, the Town Council are potentially falling foul of the reasonable precautions clause and leaving the building at risk of the following:

1. Vending machines can attract antisocial behaviour and if known that the building is unmanned this could also lead to various other problems including drugs, vandalism, arson.
2. The Station Property Sub Committee are leaving the Town Council open to claims which could affect the premiums and possibly cover going forward.
3. One incident would likely lead to more as the word would get out that the area is unmanned

4. Zurich would not provide cover at all for the vending machines for damage or theft. The provider might insist that the Town Council would reimburse for any losses.
5. Potentially, there is then the risk of damage to the vending machines or building, then leading to injuries which may lead to Public Liability claims if the Town Council are unaware of any damage and not able to sort out quickly
6. What would the proposed opening times be? If evenings, the risk is even greater. Would they be locked at certain times?

CCTV may act as a deterrent, however, the building still remains high risk. The quality of low cost CCTV systems can be poor therefore difficult to identify a person. CCTV cannot be inside the toilet cubical, we are all aware of the volume of vandalism to the public toilets.

I am sorry that this is not the answer that the Station Property Sub Committee may want, but the risk with this is high, on that basis I do not advise the Town Council to leave Isambard House unmanned.

End of Report
Councillor Bickford.