

Presentation of the petition to Somerset County Council

May 18 2016, Shire Hall, Taunton

Delivered by Richard Jones, Secretary of the Strawberry Line Association

Good morning, and thank you for giving us the opportunity to present the Strawberry Line Association's petition to you.

First a bit of background. The Cheddar Valley Line, nicknamed the Strawberry Line, ran between Yatton and Witham Junction via Cheddar, Wells and Shepton Mallet before closing in 1967. The trackbed between Yatton and Cheddar has since been turned into a multi-user path by local campaigners, together with North Somerset Council. It is now used by hundreds of people weekly, on foot, by bike, with mobility scooters and wheelchairs – for pleasure, work, shopping and attending school.

For many years now, the Strawberry Line Association has wanted to extend the Strawberry Line traffic-free route into Mid-Somerset, using the trackbed where possible. Over the last ten years, it raised nearly £100,000 for County planning officers to compile a detailed planning application. However, even after additional environmental surveys and business plans were requested and delivered, County refused to submit its own planning application without first having funds in place for the path. The Strawberry Line Association argued that funds could not be applied for without an approved planning application. The project stalled.

Since then, the Association's approach has changed dramatically. We are aiming to work more pro-actively, engaging closely with landowners, as well as Council Officers and Councillors, and focus on individual, deliverable sections rather than a grand sweeping construction project. When negotiating with landowners, we will seek to find a mutually agreeable route, and compensate appropriately where required. We will lease the land as a permissive path rather than buy it. We will maintain the path ourselves with local volunteers, and we will continue to raise our own funds for construction, maintenance, planning applications and legal costs.

The extent of community support is vast. Last year, we launched a petition urging local authorities to back the completion of the Strawberry Line, which has attracted over 5,100 signatures. When the Strawberry Line East group recently organised 20 clearance sessions on the neglected, County-owned railway path between Wells and Dulcote, the turnout was extraordinary – on one morning I counted nearly 30 volunteers! In a recent in-store public vote for Tesco's Bags of Help initiative, the Strawberry Line came first to win £12,000 towards improvements on the Dulcote path. And of course the existing Strawberry Line in North Somerset remains a hugely popular attraction to locals and tourists alike.

The benefits are wide-ranging. The completed path would bring increased tourism to the area. The famous Camel Trail in Cornwall and the Tarka Trail in Devon pump millions of pounds into the local economy every year, and we could do the same here. Once constructed, the Strawberry Line would also largely complete the Somerset Circle,

a 85-mile traffic-free circuit running through Bristol, Bath, Radstock, Shepton Mallet, Wells, Cheddar and Clevedon – a truly world-class tourist destination.

But the Strawberry Line isn't just for visitors. For schoolchildren, it will provide a Safe Route to School – a key Policy of this Council! For commuters, it will offer a healthy and cheaper alternative to driving to work. Plus it will connect up villages along the route which at present are barely accessible on foot or by bike.

5,154 petition signatories now ask the local authorities to support this vision for our county. We are not asking for money, or compulsory purchase orders. We are not waiting for others to do this for us. We are already engaged in constructive discussions with local landowners; we have forged an alliance with a local charity, Greenways & Cycleroutes, that gives us the technical capacity to prepare leases and draw up planning applications. But a formal endorsement from Somerset County Council would show the public, as well as potential funding bodies, that you share our view that, once completed, this will be a major asset for the people and economy of Somerset.

I will leave you with some selected comments taken from the petition:

A Cheddar resident writes:

"Wouldn't it be fantastic to see the Strawberry Line expanded. Clearly the current connection between Wells and Cheddar for cyclists, particularly those with families are unacceptable. The road is narrow and dangerous connecting the two. This is such a key arterial route that there must be a safe connection. A cycle route between the two would be a real jewel in the crown of this part of Somerset."

A Wells resident writes:

"This would be life changing for my family... My husband is a wheelchair user and we have 3 young children. Please, please make this happen."

A Cardiff resident writes:

"I care for my grandchildren weekly in Easton and this would enable us to be less dependent on the car for school trips twice a day. "

A Shepton Mallet resident writes:

"I believe this should be viewed as being essential to the area rather than a "nice-to-have". The road infrastructure seems to be the last thing on planners' minds when they pass plans for new housing developments and light industrial units in Somerset."

And my personal favourite, from another Cheddar resident:

"PLEASE! PLEASE! PLEASE! COME ON, Somerset! Let's wake up."

Thank you for listening.