



Severnside
Community Rail
Partnership

Creatively Connecting People and Places



Railways of Care Project Report

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March 2026



Executive Summary

Railways of Care is a rail-based community wellbeing scheme delivered on behalf of the Severnside Community Rail Partnership, with funding from Great Western Railway and Quartet Community Foundation. Running from April 2025 to March 2026, the project supported 110 unpaid carers and primary caregivers in and around Bristol through free, rail-accessible wellbeing experiences.

Purpose

The scheme was designed around three core objectives:

1. To support carers' wellbeing through respite, social connection and access to nature
2. To build confidence and skills in rail travel
3. To contribute to a more inclusive and accessible railway through lived experience feedback

The programme engaged primary caregivers and unpaid carers across generations, including adult carers, young carers and individuals supporting family members with physical disabilities, dementia, autism, mental health conditions and long-term illnesses. Participants reflected a diverse demographic profile, including significant representation from minority ethnic communities.

Activities Delivered

The scheme delivered:

- Two creative consultation workshops to shape delivery
- Thirteen rail-based wellbeing visits to local destinations, including a community gardening experience for young carers
- An arts-based evaluation workshop to capture impact

Each visit combined rail travel with a wellbeing-focused experience, such as accessible walks, play, nature connection, social time and shared meals. Young carers' visits prioritised autonomy and choice, including unstructured time at the beach and visits to local attractions.



**Severnside
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Key Outcomes

1. Wellbeing and Respite Participants consistently described the experiences as restorative. Common themes included freedom, relaxation, fun, social connection and relief from responsibility. Many carers emphasised the rarity of time organised for them rather than by them. Young carers in particular experienced meaningful release from adult-like responsibilities and opportunities for play and peer connection.

2. Increased Rail Confidence and Behaviour Change Baseline data showed that 83% of participants rarely or never used rail for leisure. Following participation, many reported increased confidence and intention to travel independently. Participants gained practical knowledge on ticketing, group coordination, accessibility and station navigation. Evidence of behaviour change included a self-organised group visit to Bath Christmas Market and increased peer-to-peer encouragement of rail use.

3. Inclusion and Belonging Carers from minority ethnic backgrounds reported increased confidence in visiting destinations where they might not previously have felt represented. The scheme contributed to a broader sense of belonging in public and leisure spaces. Constructive feedback on accessibility, sensory challenges and station infrastructure generated valuable insight for improving inclusive rail practice.

4. Ripple Effects and Community Leadership The project catalysed wider engagement beyond the funded activities. Participants organised trips independently, invited rail staff to speak about passenger assistance services, and expressed interest in further partnership with community rail. Knowledge-sharing and leadership capacity within groups increased.

5. New Collaborative Relationships Railways of Care strengthened collaborative relationships between the Severnside Community Rail Partnership and a diverse network of carer organisations. The participatory, culturally responsive approach demonstrated an effective model integrating transport access with wellbeing interventions, with clear potential for replication.

Key Learning

Relationship-building requires time and culturally sensitive engagement

- Many individuals do not identify with the term “carer”, requiring adapted language
- Participation is sometimes constrained by limited access to respite cover
- Accessibility must consider the entire journey, including access to the station and station navigation
- Working with established groups enhances trust and peer support
- Flexibility and contingency planning are essential

Overall Conclusion

Railways of Care demonstrates that accessible rail is more than a transport service. It can function as a gateway to wellbeing, connection and social inclusion. By combining relational engagement, collaboration and practical rail travel support, the scheme has expanded horizons, increased confidence and reduced barriers for unpaid carers across Bristol.

The evidence indicates that the model is both impactful and replicable. Sustained investment in similar initiatives would strengthen community engagement, widen rail participation and support wellbeing for one of society's most essential yet under-supported groups.



Introduction

Railways of Care is a rail-based community wellbeing scheme, focused on supporting unpaid carers and primary caregivers in and around Bristol - including adult carers, young carers and individuals providing regular support to family members and friends who cannot take care of themselves, because of age, illness, disability, mental health needs or other conditions.

The scheme began as a vision to connect unpaid carers with restorative experiences accessible by rail. While the initial concept was developed by the project lead (Dr Miriam Ricci), the scheme was intentionally shaped through consultation and collaboration with local carer organisations and carers themselves. Their contributions were central to refining destinations, logistics, timing and duration of visits, activities and delivery methods.

The scheme was delivered on behalf of the Severnside Community Rail Partnership, with funding from Great Western Railways and Quartet Community Foundation.

Running from April 2025 to March 2026, Railways of Care has involved various organisations that support unpaid carers and caregivers from all walks of life, ages and ethnicities, namely:

- Carers Support Bristol & South Gloucestershire
- Bristol Dementia Action Alliance
- Bristol Dementia Wellbeing Service
- Sadaga (an Easton-based charity supporting Arabic-speaking women in Bristol)
- The Somali Kitchen CIC (Redcliffe and Easton groups)
- Kulan Somali Community Knowle



The core aim of the scheme was to provide free wellbeing experiences at locations accessible via the local rail network. This approach offered carers and caregivers much needed opportunities for respite and social connection while also contributing to create a more inclusive and accessible railway.

Rationale for the Scheme

Unpaid carers represent a vital, yet significantly undervalued, workforce across the United Kingdom. Approximately 5.8 million people in the UK provide unpaid care to friends and family, a contribution valued at £184.3 billion a year, which is roughly equivalent to the entire NHS budget (Carers UK, 2025). In Bristol alone, there are an estimated 34,000 carers (Carers Support BSG, 2025). This immense contribution comes at a severe and often unacknowledged personal cost, particularly impacting the emotional and physical wellbeing of the carers themselves (Shine a Light on Care - Bristol Women's Voice, 2025).

The human costs of caring are profound, leading to a significant crisis in carers' health and quality of life:

Mental Health: Most carers report serious mental health impacts (Carers UK, 2025).

- **Stress and Anxiety:** 74% of carers have felt stressed or anxious due to their role.
- **Depression:** 40% feel depressed, with 35% describing their mental health as bad or very bad.



- **Loneliness and Isolation:** 43% of carers feel lonely. In Bristol, the problem is acute, with only 27.8% of unpaid carers reporting adequate social contact in 2023/24, a significant decline from previous years (Carers Support BSG, 2025). Isolation is particularly high among Asian/Asian British carers in the city (79%).
- **Physical Health and Exhaustion:** The relentless demands of caring severely compromise physical health and recovery time (Carers UK, 2025).
- **Physical Deterioration:** 42% of carers report that their physical health has suffered because of their role. A fifth (20%) have experienced a caring-related injury.
- **Sleep Deprivation:** 65% of carers find it hard to get a good night's sleep.
- **Sacrificing Personal Health:** A significant challenge is accessing timely healthcare for both the person they support and for themselves. 44% of carers delay their own health treatment due to their responsibilities.

1. <https://www.carersuk.org/reports/state-of-caring-2025-the-cost-of-caring-the-impact-of-caring-across-carers-lives/>
2. [https://www.carersbsg.org.uk/downloads/accelerating-reform-fund-\(arf\)-carers-breaks-report-\(1\).pdf](https://www.carersbsg.org.uk/downloads/accelerating-reform-fund-(arf)-carers-breaks-report-(1).pdf)
3. <https://www.bristolwomensvoice.org.uk/research/shine-a-light-on-care/>

Barriers to Breaks: Carers frequently report feeling overwhelmed and exhausted due to minimal access to regular, emergency, or long-term breaks (Carers Support BSG, 2025). This is compounded by emotional barriers, such as guilt at leaving the person they care for. Furthermore, complex processes and the difficulty in finding high-quality, available replacement care create additional stress, meaning that many are missing out on essential recovery time.

The idea for the Railways of Care initiative builds upon the research conducted by Carers Support BSG and Bristol Women's Voice, with their "Shine a Light on Care", a comprehensive research project into the experiences of unpaid carers and caregivers in Bristol. Drawing on the findings from these important projects, Railways of Care set out to further acknowledge the significance of unpaid carers by providing opportunities for respite and social connection by rail.

Objectives of the scheme

The Railways of Care project is guided by three main objectives:

1. Supporting Carers' Wellbeing: To provide rail-based opportunities for respite, social interaction and nature connection, opening the door for new wellbeing experiences accessible by rail.

2. Empowering Rail Travel Confidence: To enable carers to travel confidently by rail, both during and after the project, by providing information and guidance on rail accessibility, safety, services and attractive destinations accessible by rail.

3. Fostering Inclusion: To gather actionable feedback that will contribute to creating a more inclusive and carer-friendly railway network.



Shaping the scheme - a partnership approach

The Railways of Care scheme was intentionally designed in partnership with the organisations who know carers best. From the outset, local organisations supporting unpaid carers and primary caregivers were actively involved in shaping how the scheme would work in practice.

Initial engagement took place through a combination of email correspondence, and online and in-person meetings. During these discussions, potential partners were asked how the scheme could work meaningfully for their specific groups of carers and caregivers. This dialogue ensured that the project design was grounded in lived realities, practical constraints and cultural considerations.

Partners provided insight into the different needs of adult carers and young carers, including accessibility requirements, any language barriers, timing preferences, safeguarding considerations and group dynamics. This early consultation stage established shared ownership and ensured that delivery would align with the routines and trust relationships already in place within each organisation.

To ensure that carers' voices directly shaped the experiences offered through Railways of Care, two dedicated creative consultation workshops were organised in June 2025, one with adult carers and one with young carers. Both workshops were held in the venue where the groups normally meet, making it easy and familiar to access. Art supplies and refreshments were provided to create a welcoming and relaxed atmosphere.



Creative Consultation Workshop with adult carers (Bristol Dementia Action Alliance)



Participants were invited to engage in a creative activity using A4 sheets depicting a large train window frame. The prompt read:

“View from the Wellbeing Window. Use art, words or collage to fill this train window with activities, places or feelings that bring you a sense of self-care and wellbeing.”

This visual metaphor encouraged participants to imagine what they would like to see and experience through the scheme. The format enabled expression through drawing, collage and written words, allowing people to participate in ways that felt comfortable to them.

While participants were engaged in art-making, the overall aims of the Railways of Care scheme were presented, along with practical options such as potential destinations and example activities that could take place at each location.



This allowed carers to shape the direction of the programme.

Adult carers expressed a desire to:

- Visit natural environments
- Take gentle walks or strolls
- Spend unhurried time outdoors
- Share lunch, or tea and cake together



Their emphasis was on calm, social connection and shared experiences. Nature, conversation and simple pleasures emerged as priorities over more structured activities.

Creative Consultation Workshop with young carers (BSG Carers Support)



A separate creative workshop was designed specifically for young carers and delivered by an external facilitator with extensive expertise in youth engagement – Ms Monsurah Alli-Oluwafuyi (in the photo on the next page). This ensured that the format was age appropriate, dynamic and engaging.

The workshop incorporated:

- An ice-breaker bingo activity to build energy and connection.
- A mindful colouring session to support calm and focus.
- Storytelling activity using prompts to gather ideas about preferred destinations and activities.

The interactive and playful design reflected the different engagement needs of young people. It also ensured that consultation felt enjoyable rather than formal.

Young carers expressed strong interest in:

- Visiting the beach and spending time by the sea
- Playing
- Engaging with nature

Their suggestions reflected a desire for open space, movement and sensory experience, as well as opportunities for shared fun.



Value of the **partnership approach**

This consultation process ensured that Railways of Care was not imposed from above but shaped from within the communities it aimed to serve. Holding the workshops in a familiar, trusted space and embedding consultation within a creative, social setting ensured that participation was accessible and inclusive. The approach achieved several important outcomes:

- It strengthened trust and partnership with local organisations.
- It ensured that destinations and activities aligned with carers' preferences.

- It increased accessibility by hosting workshops in familiar settings.
- It modelled inclusive, participatory practice from the outset.

By inviting carers to articulate what wellbeing meant to them, the scheme honoured lived experience as expertise. The strong alignment between workshop suggestions and the visits, including nature walks, coastal trips and a sense of conviviality over food and refreshments, demonstrates that participants' voices directly influenced delivery. This foundation contributed significantly to the high levels of satisfaction and positive impact evidenced throughout the evaluation.

Ms Monsurah Alli-Oluwafuyi leading the Creative Consultation Workshop with young carers



What was delivered

Since April 2025, the project has delivered different types of wellbeing-focused activities, including a community gardening experience for young carers, and a series of twelve rail visits and walks to attractive local destinations. These activities are summarised as follows.

Community Gardening Experience

A community gardening experience was delivered for a group of young carers aged 11-18 at the Secret Garden of Avonmouth, located on Platform 1 of Avonmouth railway station (BS11 9JB). Adjacent to Avonmouth Community Centre, the site has been transformed from former wasteland into a peaceful, edible garden with raised beds, a pond and a variety of seasonal planting.

The group travelled by train from Lawrence Hill station along the Severn Beach Line, providing both a practical rail journey and an opportunity to experience the surrounding landscape en route.

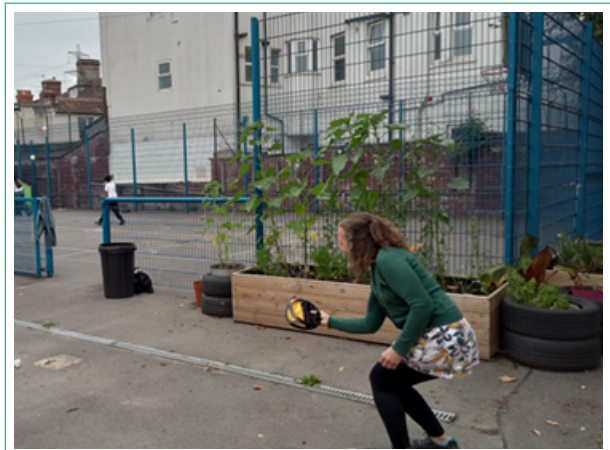


During the session, young carers were introduced to a range of gardening skills and knowledge. They learned about what was being grown, how the garden is organised, and how to care for plants through watering, propagation, de-seeding pods and pruning. The hands-on nature of the activity enabled them to engage directly with the natural environment, build practical skills and contribute meaningfully to the upkeep of the space.

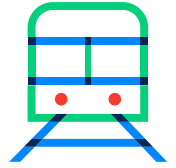


Following the gardening session, the group shared lunch at Avonmouth Community Centre, enjoying home-made soup and bread prepared with ingredients grown in the garden.

The afternoon also included informal time for games, including football, allowing young carers to relax, socialise and enjoy unstructured play in a safe and welcoming setting.



Rail-based Wellbeing Visits



A series of twelve rail visits were delivered to accessible and attractive local destinations along the regional rail network, including Weston-super-Mare, Severn Beach, Yatton (for the Strawberry Line), Bath and Bradford-on-Avon. Each visit combined rail travel with place-based wellbeing activities, tailored to the preferences of the participating group.

Weston-super-Mare

Weston-super-Mare grew into a popular Victorian seaside resort with historic piers and traditional seafront architecture. Alongside its heritage, the area offers distinctive coastal landscapes, including wide tidal beaches, the limestone headland of Brean Down with archaeological remains, and nearby hills and woodland valued for walking and wildlife.

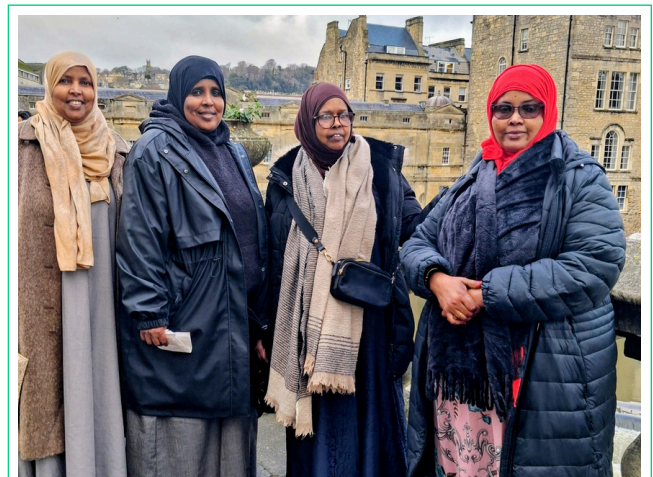


Severn Beach

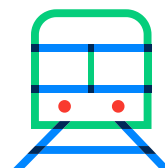
Severn Beach developed as a small seaside resort in the early 20th century but is now best known for its quiet estuary setting on the River Severn. The area's mudflats, saltmarsh and open coastal views make it a peaceful place for walking, birdwatching and experiencing one of the UK's most dramatic tidal landscapes.

Bath

Bath is a UNESCO World Heritage Site known for its Roman Baths, Georgian architecture and natural hot springs. The historic city sits within the Avon valley and is surrounded by green hills, parks and riverside paths, offering a close connection between cultural heritage and the natural landscape.



Rail-based Wellbeing Visits



Yatton and the Strawberry Line

Yatton is an historic Somerset village and the starting point of the Strawberry Line, a walking and cycling route along a former railway once used to transport local strawberries. Today the trail is valued for its railway heritage and for the accessible countryside it passes through, including fields, wetlands and Mendip views.



Bradford-on-Avon

Bradford-on-Avon is a historic Wiltshire town with medieval buildings, a Saxon church and the Kennet and Avon Canal reflecting its past as a centre of the wool trade. The surrounding valley landscape, with riverside walks, canal towpaths and wooded hills, makes it a popular place to explore both heritage and nature.



Adult carer visits typically included a short exploratory walk, offering participants an opportunity to discover the character and history of the destination. Walks were paced to be accessible and inclusive. Where groups had expressed interest, the walk incorporated elements of mindfulness and nature connection. These included guided invitations to notice the environment through the senses, learn about local trees and plants, and pause for brief reflective practices. This approach supported connection to self, others and nature, relaxation, gentle physical movement and shared conversation.



Their presence added significant value. Practically, ambassadors provided on-the-day assistance, guidance and reassurance, helping to support smooth transitions through stations.

Equally important was the relational impact. Carers consistently commented on how helpful it was to encounter a knowledgeable and approachable representative. This contact helped to humanise the railway, presenting a visible and accessible face of the company that is not always apparent in routine travel. In one instance, a younger ambassador joined the young carers in an informal game of football during a beach visit, an interaction that was warmly received and helped to build trust and positive associations with rail staff. Together, these contributions strengthened confidence, reduced perceived barriers and reinforced the sense that the railway is welcoming and responsive to the needs of passengers.



Young carer visits, particularly those to [Weston-super-Mare](#), prioritised autonomy and choice. Young people were given options regarding how they wished to spend their time, including playing on the beach or visiting the arcades on the pier. This flexibility supported independence, social interaction and age-appropriate enjoyment within a structured and safe group context.

All rail visits and experiences included a complimentary shared meal or refreshments, such as lunch or a hot drink and cake, at a local café or restaurant. These moments created space for informal connection and conversation, while also contributing to the local economy in each destination.

Across most visits, including the Avonmouth Secret Garden, a GWR staff member (on a volunteering capacity) and a GWR customer ambassador met the group either at the departure or arrival station and, in some cases, accompanied the journey itself.



Participant Profile at a Glance

110 unpaid carers and primary caregivers



The highest percentages from each category



Caregiving Relationship

30% Partners / spouses



Conditions of People Cared For

21% Autism



Age Profile

25% 35-44 years



Gender

68% Women



Ethnic Background

51% White

Train Use for Leisure (before programme)

Less than monthly / never	83%
Monthly or more	17%

Caregiving Relationship

Partners / spouses	30%
Children under 18	29%
Adult children	17%
Parents	16%

Conditions of People Cared For

Autism	21%
Physical disability	19%
Dementia / memory loss	19%
Long-term illness	19%
Learning disability	13%
Mental health	12%

Age Profile

Under 18	23%
35-44 years	25%
55-64 years	18%
75 and over	15%

Gender

Women	68%
Men	26%

Ethnic Background

White	51%
Black / Black British	33%
Other groups	16%

Who took part in the scheme

Railways of Care engaged a total of 110 unpaid carers and primary caregivers across the programme. A short anonymous feedback questionnaire was used to gather both quantitative and qualitative data. The survey collected feedback on their experience, any comments and suggestions, and information about participant characteristics and baseline rail travel behaviour – these are summarised below.

Frequency of train use for leisure or social trips

The data indicates that most participants had low prior engagement with rail travel for leisure or social purposes.

- **83% of respondents reported using the train less than once a month, or not at all, for leisure or social travel**
- **Only 17% used the train at least once a month or more frequently.**

This low baseline usage is significant. It suggests that the Railways of Care programme introduced many participants to rail-based leisure travel who would not otherwise have accessed it. Qualitative responses reinforce this interpretation. Several participants explicitly described shifts in perception and intention because of taking part in the scheme:

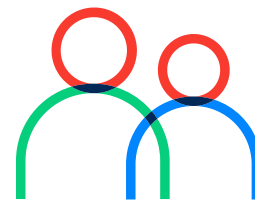
One adult carer stated:

"I never travelled by train because I didn't feel confident, but I am now open to using the train more now I've experienced this group trip."

Another shared:

"I realised the train journey is quicker than I thought. I want to take my husband and children here in the summer for a walk."

These comments indicate both increased confidence and emerging intention to use rail travel independently in future.



Caregiving relationship

Participants reflected a broad range of caring responsibilities. The primary caregiving relationships were distributed as follows:

- **Partners or spouses – 30%**
- **Children under 18, including siblings – 29%**
- **Adult children – 17%**
- **Parents – 16%**

Other respondents cared for relatives, friends or neighbours in smaller numbers.

This distribution highlights that the scheme reached carers supporting people across generations, from young siblings to ageing parents and partners. The scheme also involved older people who had caring responsibilities in the past, and people (in particular women from minority ethnic backgrounds) who were caring for family members abroad using digital devices.

Conditions of the people cared for

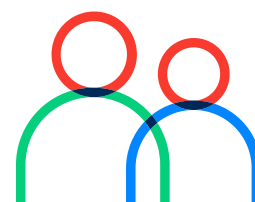
Respondents reported caring for individuals with a wide range of conditions. The most frequently identified were:

- **Autism – 21%**
- **Physical disability – 19%**
- **Dementia or memory loss – 19%**
- **Long-term illness or condition – 19%**

Learning disability (13%) and mental health conditions (12%) were also significant.

This diversity underscores the complexity of caring responsibilities within the participant group. Many carers are supporting individuals with overlapping or long-term needs, which can intensify physical, emotional and logistical demands.

Who took part in the scheme



Age profile of respondents

Participants represented a broad age range, with the largest age groups being:

- **35-44 years – 25%**
- **Under 18 years – 23%**
- **55-64 years – 18%**

Notably, respondents aged 75 and over accounted for 15% of participants, demonstrating that the programme engaged older carers as well as working-age adults and young carers. This wide age distribution reflects the cross-generational nature of unpaid caring and highlights the need for flexible, inclusive programme design.

Gender profile

Most participants were women:

- **Women – 68%**
- **Men – 26%**

This gender distribution reflects national patterns, where women are more likely to undertake unpaid caring roles. However, the participation of over one quarter male carers indicates that the programme reached a diverse range of carers across genders.

Disability status of participants

While 81% of respondents did not identify as disabled or living with a long-term health condition, 13% did report having a disability or long-term condition themselves. This finding is important. It highlights that some unpaid carers are managing their own health challenges alongside their caregiving responsibilities. For these individuals, accessible transport and manageable, carefully paced activities are particularly critical.

Ethnic background

The group was ethnically diverse:

- **White – 51%**
- **Black, Black British, Caribbean or African – 33%**
- **Other groups, including Arab, Asian, and Mixed or Multiple ethnic backgrounds – each less than 6%**

The significant representation of Black and Black British carers reflects strong engagement with local community organisations and indicates that the programme reached communities that can often be underrepresented in leisure rail travel.

Summary

The participation data demonstrates that Railways of Care successfully engaged:

- **Carers across generations**
- **Carers supporting individuals with diverse and complex needs**
- **A predominantly female but gender-diverse group**
- **An ethnically diverse participant base**
- **A large proportion of individuals with low prior use of rail for leisure**

The low baseline rail usage, combined with qualitative evidence of increased confidence and intention to travel again, suggests that the programme did not simply provide a one-off experience. It introduced rail as a viable and accessible option for leisure and social connection for carers who previously rarely used it.

What difference the Scheme made

Participants were given an A4 sheet featuring the prompt “View from the Wellbeing Window” and invited to fill the train window with collage, images and/or words representing activities, places and feelings associated with self-care and wellbeing. The train window acted as a symbolic frame, connecting their lived experience of rail journeys with deeper reflection on what those journeys had made possible. It created a shared and contained space in which participants could articulate what wellbeing looks and feels like in their own lives.



Many of the collages prominently featured green landscapes, flowers, gardens, open countryside, travel, music and calm environments. Nature was a recurring theme, reflecting the restorative value participants associated with the destinations they had visited and the experience of travelling through changing landscapes by train.

During the art-making process, the project lead gathered feedback about the trips themselves and any changes or impacts that participation had generated. Participants spoke about the sense of calm, connection and release they had experienced during the visits:

“I felt the energy in the group, and being able to just relax and enjoy the morning, a break for my mind”

This section draws together survey responses from participating carers, written observations and audio-recorded conversations during visits, reflections from support workers and group leaders, and insights from a creative evaluation workshop. Participants’ voices are central throughout.

The creative evaluation workshop, held on 16th January 2026 in Easton, Bristol, brought together a large group of carers and caregivers from Sadaga. The session adopted the same arts-based and storytelling methodology used in the earlier creative consultation workshops, enabling reflection through visual expression alongside facilitated conversation.

“I like nature, travelling by train was beautiful, there was so much green around I wasn’t expecting to see in Bristol. I just wanted to look out and enjoy the view”



The workshop served a dual function: it generated rich qualitative evaluation data about the trips, while also offering participants an additional opportunity for reflection, creativity and collective time together.



Emotional response: joy, calm and restoration

Across all data sources, the evidence shows that Railways of Care did far more than provide enjoyable days out. It created restorative space, provided access to nature, strengthened social bonds, increased rail travel confidence and skills, widened horizons and generated practical insight into inclusive rail travel. The findings also indicate a ripple effect beyond the funded activities.

When asked to describe their experience in three words, carers most frequently chose:

“Fun, joyful and exciting”

“Relaxing, empowering, blissful”

“Calm, collective, inspiring”

“Beautiful, change my mood, release”

“Wonderful, enjoyable, relaxation”

“Sunny, happy, relaxing”

The repetition of “fun” is important, particularly among young carers. It also consistently sits alongside words such as “restful”, “rejuvenating” and “relieving”, indicating something deeper than entertainment. One participant described the day as “a peace of mind break.” Another called it “a break for my brain.” The emotional register across responses reflects restoration as well as enjoyment.



Respite and recognition: relief from responsibility

A dominant theme is respite.

"My expectation was just to rest and relax with other carers."

"It was so important for me to take time away from my responsibilities, to get my energy back."

Many carers spoke about the weight of daily responsibility and the rarity of time organised for them rather than by them. Participants described what they most enjoyed:

Freedom to be on a trip without my children."

"Away from my daily caregiving responsibilities. Thank you!"

"Visiting somewhere I hadn't been before without the responsibility of organising it."

For many carers, life involves constant planning, anticipating needs and managing logistics. The scheme temporarily reversed this dynamic. One participant captured this inversion:

"There is someone caring for and guiding me."

That shift communicated recognition. During a mindful walk, a participant shared that they "felt appreciated" when the project lead reminded them "how valuable our unpaid work is". For some, the impact touched identity itself:

"The best was: me finding and living me."

Respite was framed not as indulgence but as essential. One woman caring for both her mother and brother explained the interdependence of self-care and caregiving capacity. The trip enabled her to step out of constant responsibility and return replenished:

"It was an opportunity to look after myself, because if I don't do that I cannot look after my family."



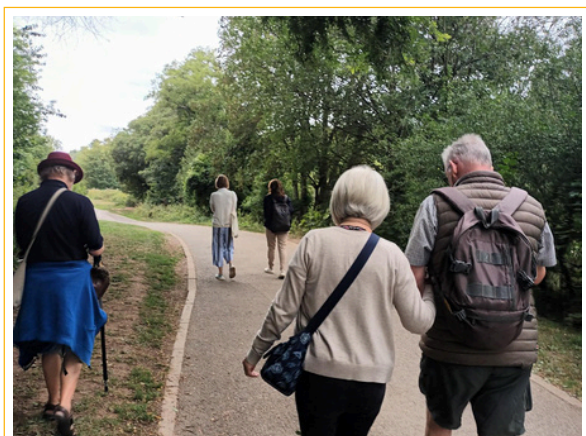
Social connection

Isolation and loneliness are common among unpaid carers. Across all visits, social connection emerged as central. Survey responses repeatedly mentioned "meeting new people", "company", "walking and talking to people in similar situations" and "time to connect with others". One participant summarised the experience as:

"Lovely company and relaxing. Very enjoyable trip."

Carers valued being with others who understand their experiences, highlighting that the rail visit was an opportunity "to talk with people who understand you, we share the same experience. And to get out of the routine."

Importantly, connection was built around shared enjoyment rather than shared difficulty. The day allowed carers to relate as people first, not solely as carers.



Hospitality and feeling valued

Support workers observed rapid social integration, even among those who arrived feeling anxious. One young person said in the morning, "I felt nervous." By the end of the day, they felt "Happy. Good." A youth worker reflected, "You wouldn't know that they weren't part of the original group." This evidences the project's ability to create psychological safety and belonging.

Shared meals and café visits held symbolic weight. Participants frequently mentioned food and hospitality.

"The café and the food was lovely... I feel like I have been spoilt today!"

"I felt like I was being treated!"



Hospitality communicated care and recognition. It reinforced that the day was intentionally designed as a special occasion for them.

Nature & wellbeing

Nature-based experiences were integral to the project design.

Participants travelled to destinations including Weston-super-Mare, Severn Beach, Bath and Bradford-on-Avon.



Carers indicated what they enjoyed the most:

"Walking, beautiful scenery and the company of friends"

"The green area!"

"Fresh air"

"Walking along the riverbank"

"Visiting the Parade Gardens, they were beautiful"

For some, it was their first time visiting these places. One wrote:

"It was my first time in Bath, and I had an amazing day out. I loved the walk along the river and watching the water flowing through the weir."

Another reflected,

"I don't usually walk in nature in my daily life."

The train journey amplified this restorative effect. Participants repeatedly referenced the view:

Being together, the view from the train."

"When suddenly there were just green fields around us, it felt so peaceful – it felt like an actual kind of release."

**"You can see more nature from the train window...
It is more relaxing."**

"There is no traffic."

The transition from city to countryside created psychological distance from routine and generated a felt sense of spaciousness. Movement through landscape became part of the intervention itself.

At the Secret Garden visit, expectations were exceeded. One young person said:

"I didn't expect much. I went looking for copper. I found gold."

Another observed that the space was "filled with flowers, plants, fruit and vegetables." Young participants engaged hands-on with gardening and took seeds back to their youth club, with plans to grow and cook produce the following year. This extends impact beyond the visit, embedding nature-based learning over time. One of the youth support workers explained:

"The gardening activity was lovely because we've been given some seeds. We're able to bring back the skills now and then we'll try and grow some things in our youth club, which is just a lovely thing. And then we'll be hopefully cooking and eating them next year, which will be great. That'll be the full culmination of this trip."



Young carers: freedom, play and release from responsibility

The impact on young carers was particularly significant. The main emotional and mental health benefits reported by young carers who attended the Secret Garden and Weston-super-Mare trips centred on gaining a sense of freedom, release from adult responsibilities, and the opportunity to focus on their own wellbeing. Many carry substantial responsibility at home and often "put themselves last".

Reflecting on the visit to Weston Pier, a youth worker highlighted the significance of the young carers being able to access spaces such as the arcades:



“A lot of them have siblings with additional needs, autism, or disabilities, which means they can’t always come into places like this. So, the fact that they have the opportunity to come out and do things like this is... it’s well brilliant for them, really.”

This comment underscores an important dimension of impact. For some young carers, leisure spaces such as entertainment centres, amusement parks or busy attractions are not easily accessible within family life due to competing needs and sensory considerations. The opportunity to enter and enjoy these environments, free from responsibility and constraint, represented more than entertainment. It offered inclusion, parity with peers and access to experiences that might otherwise be out of reach.

The youth worker concluded: *“It’s freedom. They can think about themselves for once.”*

The trips brought young people together, which helped them develop friendships and replace some of the “peer time they’ve lost” due to their circumstances. Observing young people playing freely on the beach in Weston-super-Mare, a youth worker commented:

“To see them here, watching them be free, not having to think about anyone else but themselves – that’s what being a child and a teenager is all about.”



“They don’t have to be the young adults or take on that adult responsibility.”

Play emerged as a critical mechanism for wellbeing. Digging in the sand, using water pistols and simply spending unstructured time outdoors were described as “healthy” and “such a classic example” of supporting “young people’s mental health and wellbeing”.

The relaxed atmosphere was appreciated, as the young carers had a choice in what they could spend their time on. Reflecting on the gardening experience, a youth support worker noted:

“I think it feels so nice because it hasn’t felt too structured; you had a choice in what you could do, and could chill out and get to know each other, and just try activities that you wouldn’t do under pressure. That’s a really nice aspect to it.”

The train environment itself was enabling. Young people could choose where to sit, cluster socially or find quieter spaces. This flexibility supported self-regulation and independence.

Empowering rail travel: expanding horizons, skills, confidence and future intention

A core objective of the scheme was to increase confidence and familiarity with rail travel, and expand horizons, by enabling participants to discover accessible destinations by rail. The feedback provides strong evidence that this was achieved, particularly among groups with limited prior experience.

Most participants rarely or never travelled by train beforehand. For ethnic minority participants in particular, countryside walks for personal wellbeing were uncommon.

"This was first trip since I arrived in the UK and I enjoyed it very much."

Another reflected:

"I never travel by train, but I am now open to use the train more."

Carers described learning how to buy tickets, scan at gates and navigate platforms. Accessibility awareness increased confidence:

"Now I know it's accessible and I can get the wheelchair in."

Among adult carers, increased knowledge and intention to travel again were evident:

"I didn't even know there was a train station here."

"It's a lot more relaxing than driving. I would like to do the trip with my husband."

"I want to do it again... maybe Weston-super-Mare, yeah. Definitely."

"Travelling by train is very good, and I want to take my children in the summer to show them where I have been."

"I realised the train journey is quicker than I thought."

For some, the experience replaced concern with reassurance:

"I was nervous about finding somewhere to park. It was a stress-free experience."

Youth workers described the rail element as a key part of the experience:

The train dimension of it is fantastic."

"They know it's going to be a different day when they're on a train than if they got in a minibus."

The novelty of the train journey signalled that the day was special, distinct from routine youth provision, and therefore heightened anticipation and engagement.

Importantly, participation built practical confidence. As one youth worker explained, *"It gives them the confidence as well to try it... at least they've tried it now, and they can give it a go on their own or with their families."*

Evidence from the evaluation workshop offers constructive insights about accessibility, including the importance of clear information on lift locations and reliability, distances between station entrances and platforms, and the management of sensory challenges such as noise and crowding. By articulating these experiences, participants contributed valuable lived experience evidence to inform improvements.



Ripple effects

Beyond the immediate benefits of the organised visits, the project generated some evidence of sustained engagement and behaviour change. Participants did not simply enjoy a one-off experience. Some began to integrate rail travel and group outings into their own lives.

"I actually went back to Bradford on Avon and took my parents yesterday which was lovely."

A notable example comes from the Sadaga group, who independently organised a visit to the Bath Christmas Market in December 2025 following their participation in the scheme. The group applied practical knowledge gained through Railways of Care, including meeting arrangements, ticket purchasing and group coordination.

The group leaders and participants reflected on what they had learned:

"I knew what the station looked like, so I knew how early to meet before train departure."

"I discovered the Group Save option, so from now on I will make use of it."

"You need one person at the back to make sure everyone is there and they are not getting lost."

"It's important that rail staff are welcoming and friendly to help people who are not familiar with the trains."

These comments indicate not only increased personal confidence but also developing organisational capability and leadership within the group. Knowledge had moved from being facilitated to being owned and applied.

Following participation, they were encouraging others to try rail travel. This peer-to-peer encouragement extended the project's reach beyond those who directly attended the visits, helping to normalise rail use within their communities and reduce apprehension among those who had previously felt uncertain.

Some participants from minority ethnic backgrounds shared that the trips increased their confidence to visit destinations where they might not usually see many people who look like them. Experiencing these places as welcoming and safe strengthened their sense of belonging and comfort in travelling more widely. This represents an important dimension of inclusion, extending beyond transport to confidence in occupying public spaces.

The Sadaga group leader reported increased trust from women and their families following the trips, strengthening her capacity to organise future activities independently. This suggests strengthened community leadership and cohesion.

The ripple effect extended further. Another group of carers invited a GWR staff member to speak about passenger assistance services. This proactive step enabled a wider circle of carers to understand how to travel safely and confidently with their loved ones, particularly where additional needs or disability are involved. The initiative reflects growing collective confidence and a shift from participation to advocacy and information-sharing.

Taken together, these developments demonstrate that Railways of Care has catalysed wider awareness, strengthened community capability and fostered an ongoing culture of shared learning around inclusive and accessible rail travel, while building carers' confidence to access community resources independently through the rail network.

Institutional and partnership impact

Some groups, particularly carers from minority ethnic communities, expressed interest in receiving more detailed information about services operating from Stapleton Road railway station. They indicated that they would welcome the opportunity to liaise with the Severnside Community Rail Partnership to better understand routes, ticketing options and available support. This demonstrates an appetite not only for continued engagement, but for structured partnership and dialogue to improve awareness and accessibility of local rail services.

In sum, this project strengthened the Severnside CRP's actual and potential collaborative relationships with community organisations supporting carers and primary caregivers from diverse backgrounds, including underrepresented groups. It established an effective model combining transport access with wellbeing interventions, demonstrating potential for replication by other community rail partnerships.

Challenges and lessons learnt

Engagement and relationship building

Engaging with community groups of carers proved more time-intensive than anticipated. Building trust and developing a clear understanding of participants' needs and preferences required substantial relationship-building before activities could be designed effectively.

It also became evident that many participants did not identify with the term "carer". For example, most Muslim women involved in the project were providing care for family members, in some cases even offering emotional support to relatives abroad. However, they regarded this support as a normal cultural expectation rather than a distinct caring role. This required an expanded understanding of what providing care means in different cultural contexts and an adjustment to recruitment language and approach accordingly.

A further barrier to engagement was the difficulty some carers experienced in securing alternative care arrangements. In several instances, carers were unable to participate because they could not identify a trusted replacement or arrange suitable cover for the person they support. This highlights a structural constraint affecting participation. Even when activities are fully funded and accessible, involvement depends on the availability of respite. Future programmes need to consider lead-in times and closer alignment with respite provision to mitigate this challenge.

Feedback Collection

Gathering feedback during visits presented some challenges, as care was taken not to interrupt participants' valuable time for relaxation and peer connection. This was addressed by keeping feedback mechanisms simple and brief, prioritising participants' experience while still capturing essential insights. In some instances, feedback was collected through partner organisations following events, and an evaluation workshop was organised to enable more in-depth reflection in a dedicated setting.



Language barriers were also a consideration for some groups. To ensure that everyone could take part meaningfully, activities and feedback questions were shared in advance, allowing participants time to understand what was being asked. Where needed, individuals with stronger English skills supported others by acting as informal translators. This approach helped make the delivery and evaluation process more inclusive while maintaining a relaxed and supportive environment.

Logistical and practical challenges

Transport to departure stations presented varying challenges depending on participants' locations and personal circumstances. Some carers were elderly or disabled themselves, requiring careful consideration of door-to-door accessibility. This was addressed by working closely with partner organisations to arrange shared transport where necessary and by selecting departure stations with good local accessibility.

Weather required contingency planning for outdoor activities. Flexibility was built into each visit, for example by allowing additional time in cafés in the event of heavy rain, ensuring that a positive experience could be maintained regardless of conditions.

Group dynamics and timing

The project worked primarily with established groups supported by partner organisations, occasionally including new members. This approach proved effective, as participants and support staff already understood one another's circumstances and were able to provide mutual support. Timing was discussed individually with each group, and activities were designed in a bespoke manner to suit when most participants were available.

Financial sustainability

All groups expressed strong interest in continuing similar activities. However, as most carer charities operate within limited budgets, the fully funded nature of the project was particularly valuable and widely welcomed.

Key learning points

- Allow sufficient time for relationship-building before designing activities
- Anticipate and understand any language barriers and allow time for clear explanation of activities - sharing information in advance where possible and enabling peer translation to support inclusive participation
- Recognise that caring roles vary culturally and that many people do not identify with the term "carer"
- Anticipate barriers related to respite cover and build in sufficient lead time
- Balance feedback collection with the quality of participant experience
- Consider comprehensive accessibility, including journeys to and from stations
- Build weather contingencies into outdoor activities
- Working with established groups enhances peer support and engagement



Conclusion

Railways of Care was established with three clear objectives: to support carers' wellbeing through rail-based respite and nature connection; to empower carers to travel confidently by rail; and to contribute to a more inclusive and accessible railway through lived experience insight. The evidence presented throughout this report demonstrates that the scheme has delivered meaningfully and credibly against all three aims.

At an individual level, the impact was both emotional and practical. The visits created rare opportunities for carers to step away from responsibility and to be cared for rather than caring. For young carers in particular, the opportunity to play, make choices and temporarily release adult-like responsibilities was significant. Across age groups, the combination of rail travel, access to nature, shared meals and supportive group environments generated restoration, connection and renewed energy.

At a behavioural level, the programme introduced rail as a viable and accessible option for leisure and social connection for many participants who had previously used it rarely or not at all. Increased confidence was evidenced through expressed future intention, independent trip planning and the application of practical learning such as ticket purchasing, meeting arrangements and use of group travel discounts. The self-organised visit to Bath Christmas Market and the invitation of a rail representative to speak about passenger assistance services illustrate that knowledge moved beyond facilitated participation to independent action and peer-to-peer encouragement.

At a community level, the scheme strengthened confidence among carers from minority ethnic backgrounds to access destinations where they may not previously have felt represented. Participants reported feeling welcomed and safe, contributing to a broader sense of belonging within public and leisure spaces. This dimension of impact extends beyond transport confidence to inclusion and participation.

The scheme also generated valuable insight into inclusive rail practice. Feedback highlighted the importance of having clear information on the rail station environment, such as the location and reliability of lifts, distances between station entrances and platforms, and managing sensory environments. The presence of knowledgeable and approachable rail ambassadors during visits helped to humanise the railway and reduce perceived barriers. These experiences reinforce the role of community rail partnerships as connectors between rail operators and diverse communities.

Organisationally, Railways of Care strengthened the Severnside Community Rail Partnership's relationships with a diverse network of carer organisations across Bristol. The collaborative and participatory approach built trust, ensured cultural sensitivity and embedded lived experience at every stage. The model demonstrated how transport access can be meaningfully integrated with wellbeing interventions, offering a replicable framework for other community rail partnerships.

The lessons learnt are equally instructive. Engagement required time, trust and culturally responsive language, particularly where individuals did not identify with the term "carer". Participation was sometimes constrained by the structural challenge of securing respite cover, highlighting the importance of adequate lead-in times and alignment with support services. Careful balancing of feedback collection with participant experience proved essential. Working with established groups enhanced psychological safety and peer support. Building flexibility into delivery, including contingency planning for weather and accessibility, was critical to maintaining positive outcomes.

Taken together, Railways of Care demonstrates that accessible rail offers more than just a transport function. It is a gateway to wellbeing, connection and inclusion. By reducing confidence barriers, modelling supportive group travel and embedding relational practice, the scheme has helped carers expand their horizons and reclaim time for themselves.

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About the author



Dr Miriam Ricci is a creative facilitator and coach specialising in the design, delivery and evaluation of evidence-informed experiences that support individual wellbeing while creating positive social impact. Her mission is to help more people enjoy the benefits of movement and nature in ways that are accessible, inclusive and sustainable.

Miriam's extensive research expertise focuses on how sustainable travel can enhance wellbeing and strengthen social connections. In her previous role as a Senior Research Fellow at UWE Bristol, she received a Community Rail Award for the Days Out by Train project, recognising its contribution to connecting disadvantaged communities through local rail. She now leads her own coaching and consultancy practice, helping organisations and individuals create positive change. Find out more at www.miriamriccicoaching.com and connect with her on LinkedIn.

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