

Item:

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Report to Partnership Meeting 7 February 2020

RESEARCH AND STRATEGY DELIVERY

Highland Railways Digital Heritage App

Purpose of Report

To update members on a proposal to develop a Highlands Railway Heritage App, led by Robert Gordon University (RGU) and in collaboration with HITRANS and ScotRail.

Background

RGU are interested in developing an App and Website based digital platform that celebrates – and allows Scotrail passengers to explore and enjoy - the natural and cultural heritage of the communities and places served by the Far North, Kyle of Lochalsh Lines and West Highland Lines. The App would tell the stories of the people and places along these distinctive, popular and scenic routes, enabling passengers to gain a deeper and richer understanding of the communities - their history and heritage - and of both the natural landscape and built environments.

Passengers using the lines would be able to access a digital platform that hosts a range of information about a station, via a website or mobile app (available from Google Play and App store). For example:

- Old photos and movies that celebrate the cultural heritage of a station, place or community
- Text and Audio stories about local folklore and history
- Information about the natural heritage, geology and archaeology
- Information about/ advertising for local arts and crafts or food and drink producers and local 'things to do'
- Information about/ advertising for local places to stay.

Most of the basic information would be available via the app and website (to assist in planning and to raise awareness), but some would be unlocked as a train approaches a station. There would be some sort of bonus (more information unlocked) when all stations have been visited. Frequent users would be granted a status level based on completion/interactions

The app and website will draw on an online (web-based) repository of content containing material in different forms and media, text, images, maps, sound recordings, moving images and others. The sound recordings will include both narrated content and contributed "local voice" content where appropriate (gathered through the community engagement activities). Accessing content will be delivered both geographically by location and thematically with such themes including Landscape, Heritage, Arts and Crafts, Stories and the history of the lines themselves (recognising the huge appetite for such from railway enthusiasts).

Staff at Robert Gordon University's School of Creative and Cultural Business have extensive experience working with local communities in gathering stories, legends and folklore in a range of communities (including Orkney, Eilean Siar, and a range of locations in the North-East such as Elgin, Buckie and Fraserburgh). Most recently, the work of the school has led to the launch

of the Orkney Folklore App¹ which guides visitors across sites, telling them stories and legends using spoken words, images, text and song. Similarly, a current project is collecting stories from across the North-East

The Digital platform

An end-to-end digital platform will be developed to host stories, trails, movies, and information about locations and events in a range of multi-media formats.

The application will be cloud hosted giving flexibility to scale efficiently to meet any level of demand, as well allowing easy access for all device types. State-of-the-art architecture and technologies will be employed in developing a secure back-end application and database that is accessible via an API; front-end development will employ a current production standard JavaScript framework, such as React for web development and React Native providing a cross platform development for iOS and Android mobile devices. The cloud platform will fully support consumers of content with easy context-aware access to the hosted information.

The platform will provide full support for the uploading and management of content, along with associated metadata (e.g. location, source, topic, links, etc) providing additional relevant contextual information. The availability of metadata allows content to be organised, searched and filtered on a wide range of facets, providing a more focused experience to the content consumer, based on their specific requirements or preferences.

Robert Gordon University, having developed the app technologies, will retain the Intellectual Property (IP) for the content and digital solution. The University is currently developing a not-for profit company to generate revenue to sustain digital story telling platforms in the long term

Local partners

Robert Gordon University has a strong record of engaging in effective partnerships for projects. In addition to Scotrail and Hitrans, a number of key organisations have been identified for this proposed project including for the FNL, *inter alia*, Timespan in Helmsdale, Wick Heritage Society, North Highland Initiative, Dunrobin Castle, Ross and Cromarty Heritage, the Kyle Line Museum,

Funding

RGU is preparing a bid to the Heritage Lottery Fund to support the development of the App for the Far North, Kyle and West Highlands Lines. RGU is seeking something in the region of £350,000 over three years. The Heritage Lottery Fund requires 5%-10% match funding for this amount. Scotrail have indicated that are interested in the project and may be able to assist with - at least part of - the match funding.

Recommendation

Members are invited to note the report

Report by David Gray
Designation: Non-Council Board member
Date: 3rd February 2020

¹ Available at <https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.rgu.a1810598.fromtalestotrails>