

Transforming Meldreth, Shepreth and Foxton Stations: the ice cream factor

Station adoptions and community rail partnerships are commonplace in some quarters, but as yet unknown in the First Capital Connect patch.

A bit of inspiration from two National Express stations in Cambridgeshire – Ely and March - was the impetus for first steps at three First Capital Connect stations on the Cambridge-King's Cross line. Meldreth, Shepreth and Foxton are now festooned with flower tubs, bird boxes, butterfly and badger habitats, and a flower and veg garden on the site of the old stationmaster's garden at Meldreth.

The success of getting bringing these gardens to life has been down to the willingness and interest of dozens of local businesses and residents, who have provided donations of all necessary materials plus ongoing donations of time. Virtually all local primary and secondary schools have got their hands dirty, and garden tending has become a rival to the after-school X Box. Certainly the most tantalizing contribution has been free ice cream, provided by the Meldreth Sidings ice cream distributor Gocold. This was served up at the three stations' birthdays on July 9th, when the gardens were formally launched, and must have had something to do with the draw of many hundreds of people who came in support. Now in late summer, courgettes, tomatoes and cucumbers are the draw.

This tremendous local support is rooted in historic interest in the railway, but also in the knowledge that the rail network on our rural doorstep is a public transport gateway to pretty much everywhere. With Cambridgeshire County Council's recent decision to scrap 100% of its bus subsidies – the most draconian bus subsidy cuts in England - access to rail is more important than ever.

The Meldreth, Shepreth and Foxton Rail User Group, who sponsored the gardens project, is now anticipating First Capital Connect's plans on formalizing station adoption and/or community rail partnerships – both of which have been included in Cambridgeshire County Council's revised Local Transport Plan and in the council's bid to the Sustainable Transport Fund.

Of course, access is everything. The Rail User Group will be organizing winter planting of the new platform tubs and vegetable garden, but in so doing it expects to add weight to its continuing campaign for better access to rail: disabled access where platforms are inaccessible to many, elimination of parking charges in villages with few public amenities, and a safer environment for pedestrians at Foxton, famous for a notoriously difficult level crossing.

Watch this space!

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