

Volunteers Meeting 2024

General Managers Presentation

It is my absolute pleasure to welcome you all to our Annual Volunteers Meeting, we stand at a particularly momentous juncture – the 50th Anniversary of K&ESR's reopening.

This year is not just a milestone; it's a testament to the incredible journey everyone here has embarked on together, yes it has been filled with challenges, triumphs, and relentless passion.

In this afternoon's presentation, I will navigate through three critical themes that are integral to our past, present, and future: 'Survive, Safety, and Sustainability.' These themes are the bedrock of our operation and the essence of our collective spirit.

Embracing Our Journey

This is a pivotal moment in our, K&ESR's, history – our 50th year. The journey has been a remarkable tapestry of resilience, overcoming challenges that once seemed insurmountable. We have survived and thrived. We celebrate not just the perseverance that has defined our past but also our commitment to safety, which goes beyond protocols to caring deeply for our community and heritage.

And as we look towards 'Sustainability,' we embrace a future that balances our cherished traditions with innovative adaptability. This afternoon is about reflecting on our triumphs, acknowledging our current strengths, and eagerly anticipating the exciting path ahead.

Reflecting on 2023 – Our Achievements and Learnings

I stood before you at last year's meeting and listed several objectives for the year it is only fair, we see how we measured up. 2023 was year that was both challenging and rewarding.

Let's start with the positives.

Targets Achieved:

- Income: We achieved our target of £2.5m in cash.
- Pullman Experiences: We continued to provide exceptional Pullman experiences.
- Santa Season: We delivered another amazing Santa season.
- Group Travel Offers: We developed attractive group travel offers that brought in visitors, working particularly with our partners at Fox and Edwards.
- Themed Events: We held a series of themed events such as the '40s, steampunk, and classic cars, which drew in extra visitors.
- Mini-Gala: Successfully ran a Mini-Gala in May, showcasing the railway and operating to Junction Road.
- 'A Set Ride' Refresh: Implemented a refresh of the core 'A set ride'.
- Victorian Set Use: Used our 'Victorian Set' as a flagship for a 'travel back in time'.
- Real Ale Trains enhancement: Made the RAT more imaginative.
- Catering Improvements: the refurbished Kitchen Car in the Pullman and improvements to our overall catering offer, notably with Diana serving breakfasts and lunches in the A set
- Behind-the-Scenes Tours: Refreshed our behind-the-scenes tours.

Operational Performance:

- Presentation: Our locos, carriages, and station sites were presented in the cleanest and freshest way possible, thanks to the **Loco Cleaners, Station Staff, Day Gangs, Foresters, and Gardeners**.
- Train Running and Station Work: Improved our train running and station work to a professional standard.
- Northiam Level Crossing: Completed the Northiam Level Crossing. A significant risk mitigation despite it appearing as mere new tarmac.

Key Developments:

- Heritage Building Fund: Successfully fundraised for a heritage building fund to repair our station buildings and associated structures.
- Loco Strategy and Achievements: Board approved the loco strategy with No. 25 returning to service, D9504's return, support from Hasting and Marcia at the Gala, and the successful visit of 257 Squadron and the BR Standard 2 for Santa.

Volunteer Work:

- Continued excellent volunteer work on the GWR Railcar, work started on the Ford diesel Number One; carriage winter maintenance with Petros returning to service.
- Safety Management System: Rewrote the SMS to accurately reflect our safety practices.

Strategic Collaborations:

- Heritage Railway Collaboration: Developed joint working with other heritage railways, forming the 'Southern Six'.
- Response to Robertsbridge Inquiry: Positively responded to opportunities presented by the outcome of the Robertsbridge Inquiry.

Areas for Improvement:

- Theatrical Productions: We didn't explore opportunities in theatrical productions (Events team).
- Loco Developments: The Yank tank, No. 65, did not return to steam in late summer.
- Website Improvement: Saw little improvement in making our public website more intuitive, informative, and accessible.
- Membership Growth: Limited discussion on how to grow and make membership more supportive of the railway.
- Training: Did not run as much training as we would have liked.

Organisational Structure:

- Yet to publish an updated organisational chart and job descriptions that reflect both the current reality and our management aspirations.
- Working Timetable and Rosters: were delayed, but slowly we are speeding up the processes

Thank you for being part of our journey in 2023. Your efforts and contributions have been crucial in shaping the path that lies ahead for K&ESR. Now, as we look forward to the rest of 2024, let's do so with the confidence and knowledge that comes from a year of significant growth and learning."

Resilience and Triumph – 'Survive'

"Tonight, as we focus on 'Survive - Our Resilient Past,' let's journey through K&ESR's history, a narrative defined by resilience and collective strength.

Our railway's story is marked by challenges times from 1961 when the future was cloaked in uncertainty, stations silent, and engines dormant, we waited many years for a Light Railway Order to eventually reopen 1974. Yet, against these odds, we stand today, commemorating fifty years of revival and relentless spirit.

Remember, this resilience stems from you – every volunteer, every staff member. Your unwavering dedication and love for this historical gem transformed daunting challenges into milestones of success.

Let's engage in a brief, reflective exercise. Close your eyes, if you wish, and envision your best K&ESR memories: lively stations, a gala, white billowing steam on a clear frosty morning, the joy on our visitors' faces at Santa time. Of friends and our Railway Family immersed in the sense of unity, the bond we share over our railway.

Hold onto that memory, feel what it meant to you, the emotions it stirred within your heart.

In this moment of reflection, I ask you to imagine, just for a second, that the railway – your railway – has closed. The tracks are silent, the stations deserted, the carriages and locomotives locked away from sight and memory. Feel the weight of that loss.

Now, ask yourself: would the world, would future generations be poorer for this closure? Is the legacy, the joy, the education that K&ESR provides worth saving, worth fighting for?

Open your eyes when you're ready. The reality is this scenario could become true if we all don't act. So, I ask you: is preserving our railways just a nostalgic endeavour, or is it a vital mission to keep our history, our experiences, our stories alive for the generations to come? Your reflections and actions will hold the answer.

This introspection isn't merely about honouring our past. It's a recognition of our role in stewarding this legacy into the future. As we enter our 50th year, let's embrace our resilient spirit. It's this strength that has guided us through adversities and will continue to light our way as we navigate the future, together, with determination and pride."

Emphasising Safety – 'Safety: Our Commitment in the Present'

"In this next slide, we turn to 'Safety - Our Commitment in the Present.' At K&ESR, safety transcends mere protocol; it's the backbone of our operations and community ethos. Safety here is not just adherence to rules; it embodies a culture of vigilance and proactive care. It's about safeguarding not only our dedicated teams but every visitor who shares our passion for heritage railways.

Our guiding principle, 'Nobody gets hurt today,' which is on every slide is more than a motto; it's a pledge we all uphold. It underlines our shared duty to ensure every day at K&ESR is safe and secure.

As we mark our golden anniversary, let's reaffirm our commitment to safety. It's more than a responsibility; it's a core value that makes K&ESR a trusted and cherished part of our community.

Thank you for being safety champions, each and every day. Your commitment to this vital aspect of our operations is invaluable and pivotal to our journey forward.

Charting a Sustainable Future – 'Sustainability: Shaping Our Future'

"Turning now to 'Sustainability - Shaping Our Future,' we look at how K&ESR can thrive for generations. Sustainability here transcends environmental stewardship; it encompasses financial health, community ties, and preserving our heritage in a world that's constantly evolving.

Let's reflect on some 'C' words, no not one, that underpin our sustainability efforts:

Consolidation,
Cooperation,
Collaboration,
Community,
Charity,
Comparing with our Competition,
Creative,
Change,
Customer,
Charting our Course,
Coal,
Children and the next generation,
Courage,
Continuity, and
Culture.

Each represents a pathway toward a sustainable future:

Consolidation and Efficiency in operations
Cooperation and Collaboration for shared success
Community engagement at the heart of what we do
Embracing Challenges and learning from Comparisons
Fostering Creativity and adaptability
Prioritising our Customers' experience
Charting a forward-looking course, mindful of our 'Coal' heritage
Engaging Children, our future's stewards
Courage to embrace Change and innovation
Ensuring Continuity of our journey through time
Upholding a Culture of safety and excellence

In embracing these principles, we are already taking steps toward a greener, more efficient operation. We're exploring new technologies and revenue streams, constantly refining visitor experiences to remain competitive and engaging.

As we mark 50 years, let's commit to a future where K&ESR is not just surviving but thriving.

Each one of us plays a crucial role in this mission. Your creativity, dedication, and passion fuel our journey towards a sustainable, vibrant future.

Embracing Challenges and Celebrating Success – 'The Big Picture: Challenges and Achievements'

"As we focus on 'The Big Picture: Challenges and Achievements,' let's recognise both the hurdles we've faced and the triumphs we've celebrated at K&ESR.

Our path is marked by formidable challenges: aging infrastructure, the need for more funding, and the continuous effort to engage new volunteers. These challenges demand our constant innovation and unwavering spirit.

In today's digital era, we also grapple with integrating our rich heritage into a fast-paced, technology-driven world. These challenges shape our journey, but they also fuel our resilience and creativity.

Thank you for being an integral part of K&ESR's story. Your resilience, creativity, and dedication are what enable us to not just endure but excel. Together, we're creating a legacy – a story of a railway that confronts challenges head-on and celebrates each success with heartfelt pride."

The Heart and Soul of Our Journey – 'Why We Do What We Do: The Soul of K&ESR'

"Let's explore into '[Why We Do What We Do - The Soul of K&ESR](#).' and reflect on what truly energises our collective efforts.

K&ESR is an entity alive with a unique soul. This soul manifests in the rhythmic chuff of our locomotives, the joy and awe of our visitors, and your dedicated volunteering. It's in the memories we craft, the history we safeguard, and the community spirit we nurture.

Our railway, with its distinctive charm and quirks, tells stories at every curve. These are tales of past eras, technological wonders, and the people who have shaped this remarkable journey.

At the heart of K&ESR's soul are you, the volunteers. You are the custodians of this legacy, infusing it with your passion, skills, and time. Each repair made, ticket sold, and shared tale, enriches K&ESR's tapestry, making our railway a dynamic part of the community.

As we mark 50 years, let's embrace why we're here. It's more than preserving railway history; it's about keeping alive a legacy for future generations. It's where history and today converge, creating a future shaped by our united efforts.

Thank you for being K&ESR's heart and soul. Your commitment makes our railway not just special, but extraordinary. Together, let's continue to fuel the soul of K&ESR, ensuring its vibrance for years to come."

Celebrating Half a Century – 'The 50th Anniversary Celebration'

"As we explore 'The 50th Anniversary Celebration,' let's immerse ourselves in the excitement of this monumental milestone. This year, we're not just celebrating five decades of K&ESR; we're honouring the people, stories, and experiences that have woven the rich fabric of our railway.

Our 50th anniversary transcends a mere milestone; it symbolises resilience, community spirit, and a deep-seated love for heritage. We have an array of events lined up, each promising to be as unforgettable as they are significant.

Your role in these celebrations is invaluable. Whether you're behind the scenes planning, actively participating, or simply joining in the festivities, your contribution adds a special sparkle to our anniversary.

This landmark year is also an open invitation to our broader community. It's a chance to share our story, forge new connections, and strengthen existing ones, showcasing what K&ESR truly embodies. Our 50th Anniversary Event in June will include events at Robertsbridge, where we will be one railway, one railway family and soon to formally join up on the completion of the extension.

Let us look at what lies ahead this year.

- There is an exciting range of events this year.
- We will have a new hired in engine for 2024 in BR Standard 4 No 76017 which will arrive before Easter.

- There will be a visit of a Class 37/7 for the diesel gala, a first for K&ESR.
- Along with a Class 17.
- Britannia, sponsored by LSL will be running shuttles at Robertsbridge for our Anniversary celebrations.
- U Class 31806, sponsored by Rapido, will be visiting the Tenterden end of the Railway.
- We hope to secure the Bluebell O1 as a visitor.
- And fingers crossed through the efforts of Liam, George and the volunteers at Rolvenden hope to have a Terrier back in gentle steam for our 50th Anniversary celebrations, which I believe would not be complete without a Terrier.

And if you feel like being negative Pete Salmon has the answer with some Anti Whinge Pills.

Envisioning Our Future Together – 'Our Collective Journey Ahead'

"Let's turn our attention to 'Our Collective Journey Ahead,' emphasising the crucial role each of you plays in shaping K&ESR's future.

Each idea and effort you contribute significantly shapes our railway. Your innovative thoughts and suggestions are the catalysts that propel us forward. I encourage you to voice your ideas and be an active part of our evolution.

As K&ESR volunteers and ambassadors, you play a pivotal role in bringing our heritage to life for every visitor and in connecting us with the wider community.

Let this year be more than a commemoration; let it be a launchpad for our future endeavours. Your engagement, enthusiasm, and dedication are the driving forces that will steer K&ESR into the next half-century.

Thank you for being the essence of K&ESR. Together, let's embark on this journey with unwavering passion, pride, and a united vision for the years to come."

Honouring Our Essence – 'Leaving a Legacy: Our Single Memorable Thought'

I conclude this presentation with 'Leaving a Legacy: Our Single Memorable Thought,' let's take a moment to deeply appreciate what we are part of at K&ESR.

K&ESR is more than a heritage railway; it's a living chronicle of history, a custodian of stories, and a beacon of joy and learning. What truly distinguishes us, the essence of our railway, is its soul.

This soul is an intangible presence, felt in the warm greetings of our visitors, the lively conversations of our volunteers, and the rhythmic dance of trains along the tracks. It's present in every shared story, every journey embarked upon, and every person we connect with.

The soul of our railway mirrors the charm, the quirks, the history, and the passion that each of you embodies. It's about being uniquely ours – cherished, distinctive, and irreplaceable.

As we step into another running season, let this resonate with us: What we do here extends beyond preserving trains. We're sustaining a soul that binds us together, a spirit that drives and inspires us, and a reminder of why we dedicate ourselves to K&ESR.

Let this be the thought that guides you – every time you join us, you're not just contributing to a railway; you're nurturing the soul of a community, a living tradition.

Thank you for being the guardians of this soul. Your commitment, passion, and energy are what transform K&ESR from just a railway to a journey of heart, life, and enduring soul."

Fostering Engagement – 'Your Thoughts and Ideas'

"As I bring this presentation to a close – 'Your Thoughts and Ideas' – is not an end but a gateway to ongoing collaboration and communication.

Feel free to ask questions or share your ideas, no matter how seemingly small, now or later this evening.

Let's Continue to Survive, Stay Safe, and Sustain Ourselves for the future.

Robin Coombes
General Manager