



November 2024

Welcome to the Rail User Express

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So the budget is done and dusted. East West Rail (EWR) to Cambridge, and HS2 tunnelling to Euston are confirmed, as is the Transpennine Route Upgrade (TRU), but that is already fully funded and well in hand. And that's it: no Ely, no capacity increase north of Birmingham, and no Northern Powerhouse Rail (NPR). A new [ECML timetable](#) is also still outstanding and long overdue.

Roger Smith

We start with news from groups around Great Britain. All contributions are gratefully received.

Friends of the Far North Line

2024 marks the 150th anniversary of the completion of the Far North Line to Thurso and Wick, the northernmost British railway. It was built rather against the odds, aided by immense personal investment of the 4th Duke of Sutherland, and has survived several periods of probable closure, but is now recognised as a vital and integral part of the transport system in the north of Scotland.

The actual anniversary was 28 July, but celebrations were delayed by this year's round of pay negotiations. In October, aided by the Scottish Association for Public Transport, the Highland Railway Society, the Highland Transport Partnership (HITRANS) and the Line's new CRP, FoFNL put on a four-day photographic exhibition about the line in the North Coast Visitor Centre in Thurso that attracted much interest. Then, on 2 November at Wick Station, FoFNL President Jamie Stone, a long time supporter of the railway and MP for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross, unveiled a commemorative plaque provided by NR.

Lakes Line Rail User Group

Avanti West Coast has a ticket for travel to Keswick Bus Station via Penrith. The on-board information screens flag up the Stagecoach connection as the train approaches the station. This is a positive development towards seamless integrated travel.

And its Superfare ticket is the cheapest to or from London Euston. The customer selects one of three time slots (morning, afternoon or evening) and is allocated a specific train 24 hours before the day of travel. Oxenholme – Euston (or return) is just £26. LLRUG would like to hear from anyone who has used one of these tickets about how it worked out.

Both of the Class 197 units involved in the Grange derailment suffered more damage than initially thought, leaving Northern two trains short. So the 0829 from Manchester Airport (1021 from Oxenholme on weekdays, 1033 Saturdays) may be a single 3-car unit rather than a double.

Support The Oldham Rochdale Manchester lines

The number of cancellations, especially in peak times, is fast reaching epidemic levels. Together with local councillors, STORM will seek a meeting of local MPs, covering every area served by the Clitheroe/Blackburn route, and along the Calder Valley line. It would like people to make contact to campaign for an immediate solution to this unacceptable service provision.

Salford Central station will be closed from 10 February to 21 April 2025, although trains will still run through the station. TfGM and NR are investing £10m in new customer information points and wayfinding to join up with Greater Manchester's Bee Network. However, a 2-month closure would suggest more than just a little cosmetic work on the station concourse. STORM wonders if it could also see the re-opening of the Liverpool line platforms, including access improvements.

Then, on several weekends between March and September 2025, NR will close Salford Crescent station to build a third platform, both to improve passenger flow, and reduce delays by giving signallers more flexibility to path trains. The £21m project will be completed in early 2026.

Labour MP Paul Waugh has written to ORR in support of Lumo's bid for a direct rail link from Rochdale to London, the first since 2000. The service would run via Manchester Victoria, Eccles, Newton-Le-Willows and Warrington Bank Quay, then direct to Euston. London passengers would have an alternative to Avanti's service without having to cross Manchester.

Mid Cheshire Rail Users Association

MCRUA has long campaigned for the 3.5 mile Manchester Airport Western Link to Mobberley on the Mid Cheshire Line that British Rail proposed in the early 1990s. The route is safeguarded, and would allow North Wales trains to run direct to the airport with a journey time from Chester of about 40mins against 84mins currently via Warrington Bank Quay and the Castlefield corridor. It would also be the shortest route between Liverpool and Manchester Airport, via Liverpool South Parkway, the station for Liverpool Airport. Alternatively, if NPR proceeds via Manchester Airport, it should have a junction with the Mid Cheshire Line.

London Northwestern Railway wants to extend its London - Crewe service to Manchester Victoria via Warrington Bank Quay from summer 2026 with a journey time to London of 3 hrs 10 mins. MCRUA is lobbying for the service to call at Winsford, Hartford and Acton Bridge. LNR would also like to extend its Stafford to Crewe shuttle to Manchester Airport.

Friends of the Barton Line

EMR has not been able to reinstate the second weekday service out of Barton, so from 16 December the first service will change from 0708 to 0754, denying early starters access to work and travel further afield, and striking yet another blow to the viability of the line. As a last and minimum resort, consideration should be given to providing a 7am bus for the Barton - Habrough part of the route, with the first Lincoln - Grimsby train service also calling at Stallingborough, Healing and Great Coates. LNER has deferred its proposed London Kings Cross - Cleethorpes service to December 2025.

Fen Line Users Association

Problems with rail replacement buses have been the hot topic for Fen Line users over the last few months. Getting large volumes of passengers between rail and road transport is never going to be seamless, but given the many years the railway's been doing this they should be better at it. The NR journey planner continues to show in error that passengers travelling between King's Lynn and Ely have to change buses at Downham Market.

The continued lack of working lifts at Royston, the interchange for those travelling to and from Kings Cross, is inexcusable. Passengers struggle with the stairs, but rail staff and bus drivers no longer seem to help, possibly for health and safety reasons; FLUA would like to see more trains using Platform 2 adjacent to the buses. And if only the shorter Platforms 5 & 6 at Cambridge are in use, trains are reduced to 4 coaches.

It seems that Cambridge South will open later than planned due to supply chain issues, and with only a limited service pending a new ECML timetable. The same issues are also delaying introduction of the Class 379s, although some may start to appear on the Fen Line next year. And there is still no start date to remodel Ely, which is key to a full half-hourly King's Lynn service.

Peterborough - Ely - Norwich Rail Users Group

PENRUG responded to the Norfolk County Council's 2024 Rail Prospectus, and shares many of its aims and aspirations, including:

- Half-hourly services from Norwich to Cambridge in 70mins, and to Nottingham
- Shorter Norwich - Liverpool journey times, with an Improved Sunday service during the university term, using trains with functioning wi-fi
- Trowse Lower Junction re-doubled, and an extra platform at Norwich
- Track enhancements at Ely and Trowse Bridge
- Accessibility improvements at Wymondham (westbound) and at Thetford
- Accessible toilets at Thetford
- Longer term, a 'mainstream' service for Wymondham – Dereham.

Thetford North still lacks a credible business case, and would compromise the aspiration for faster journeys, but the proposed site should continue to be safeguarded in case circumstances change. Better access and facilities at Wymondham are preferable to a new parkway station south west of Norwich; a bus shelter in Station Road would improve the interchange between trains and buses to Hethersett and Cringleford.

Bedwyn Trains Passenger Group

BTPG contributed to NR's "Wiltshire Rail Strategic Study" (see below). The aspiration for an hourly Paddington – Westbury service calling at Kintbury, Hungerford, Bedwyn and Pewsey to replace the Newbury shuttle would need an extra platform at Westbury, so will not be met in the short term. If it does go ahead, BTPG will campaign to retain the peak time half-hourly infills and late evening trains. Meanwhile, the restoration of direct off-peak Paddington services remains its priority.

A passenger called GWR's WhatsApp team on 07890 608043 to ask for a connection hold at Newbury. They contacted Control, and the connection was held. The number is open until 2300 each evening, so do make use of it.

Avocet Line Rail User Group

GWR looks set to get 11 x 2-car and 16 x 3-car Class 175 units once used by Transport for Wales. They would initially replace the short HST trains between Penzance and Plymouth, then some or all of the IETs that operate from Penzance to Bristol and Cardiff. Used on the Okehampton/Tarka lines, they could free a couple of Class 150s to boost Avocet Line availability, with the Class 158s helping to give Cardiff – Portsmouth the sort of service a line that links six cities deserves (it's actually seven cities: Cardiff, Newport, Bristol, Bath, Salisbury, Southampton and Portsmouth - Ed)

RAILFUTURE

Rf welcomes new members and groups to add weight to its campaigns. Join [here](#) by selecting the appropriate category from the "Membership Types" menu. Read the latest from Rf on [News and views](#), [Press releases](#), [Railfuture in the news](#), and [Consultation responses](#).

NEWS

Commenting on the budget, Neil Middleton, Rf Vice-Chair said: "We are very pleased to hear the commitment to funding the TRU [and] EWR, and that HS2 will be tunnelled to Euston. But will Euston be fundable from the private sector, and how will capacity be provided to get to cities like Liverpool and Manchester? National infrastructure is as important as local infrastructure – improvements for Bradford, Birmingham, Sheffield etc will be of the greatest benefit if the lines connecting them are reliable and high capacity. Rf is disappointed though to see no mention of the improvements at Ely Junction, so important for freight capacity, nor of those bringing local benefit such as for Portishead (in Bristol)".

Prior to the budget, Rf identified ten points to watch. The score for each is as follows:

- Increases or not in fuel duty – 1/10, as Vehicle Excise Duty will increase
- Increases or not in APD for flights – 5/10, no focus on reducing domestic air travel, except by private plane
- Confirmation (or not) of £2 cap on bus fares – 3/10, at least the concept continues
- HS2 to Euston or not – 5/10, funding for the tunnels from Old Oak Common
- HS2 to Manchester – 0/10, no news on its replacement north of Handsacre
- Other Rail investment or not – 7/10, some key projects funded
- Road investment relative to rail investment – 8/10
- More for day-to-day rail operations 0/10 – no new subsidy
- Confirmation of frozen rail fares 1/10 – the choice is the highest they could credibly get away with – using RPI, not CPI, and adding on 1%
- Funding to establish GBR – 0/10 – no sign of this.

RAILFUTURE WEST MIDLANDS

New residential and commercial investment close to Telford Central station has strengthened the case for a better rail service between Birmingham, Wolverhampton, Telford and Shrewsbury, and the need for electrification and raising the line speed to at least 90 mph.

RAILFUTURE EAST MIDLANDS

NR's [Derby Area Stations Strategic Advice](#) report, considers options to make rail travel more appealing from six of its smaller stations. Belper, Spondon, Peartree and Willington should be a priority, as the enhanced services would significantly improve the convenience of local rail travel at minimal cost. The report echoes several of Rf's concerns, for example the need for more Sheffield services to call at Belper, improved frequencies at some of the stations, more Sunday services, and better integration between rail and bus services.

CAMPAIGN FOR BETTER TRANSPORT

In the Government's first Budget: bus fare cap up by 50%; rail fares up more than inflation and railcards up £5, but fuel duty for car drivers: frozen again. The imbalance is stark, and a bitter blow both to public transport users and to the environment. While it is some relief that the bus fare cap wasn't scrapped entirely, the jump from £2 to £3 is significant. Increasing rail fares above inflation for only the second time in more than a decade is a further kick in the teeth. And increasing the cost of railcards for families, young people, veterans and seniors is a step in the wrong direction.

A giant CBT postcard with 3,650 signatures calling on Royal Mail to work with the Government to find a way for mail to stay on rail made it into the hands of its Chair, Keith Williams CBE, who also Chairs the Great British Railways Transition Team, which has been instrumental in developing a rail freight growth target for the Government. There is much that it can do to boost rail freight, including reducing track access charges for freight trains, and reducing the cost of electricity for rail freight operators who use electric traction.

COMMUNITY RAIL NETWORK

Train operators in England are due to deliver a draft business plan by the end of November. The annual process is vital to ensuring community rail has the support it needs, and can provide communities with a voice on rail.

The Friends of Bentham Station (Leeds-Morecambe CRP) celebrated their 13th anniversary along with the 8th anniversary of their twinning with the Calder Valley Mytholmroyd Station Partnership. As well as boosting their train services, the two groups seek to raise the profile of community rail by promoting each of their stations as a focal point both for leisure and business use.

[outside it is beautiful](#) is a new community-focused project about nature and local history set on the Bentham Line. An audio app allows passengers on the Line to hear stories inspired and written by local people and places.

TRANSPORT FOCUS

TF wants train companies to treat passengers more fairly when they mistakenly underpay their fare. “We know from talking to passengers how confusing the current system is – no one thinks you should have to spend ages checking detailed rules and restrictions before getting on a train,” says its Chief Executive, Alex Robertson.

Cerys Piper bought an Anytime Day Return ticket to travel to work in Wigan, and used her 16-25 railcard to get £1.60 off the £4.80 fare. But on Monday - Friday between 0430 and 1000, except on public holidays and in July and August, Anytime tickets bought with these railcards are subject to a minimum fare, currently £12 but subject to change. Unaware of this restriction, she was fined a totally disproportionate £462.80, and now has a criminal record. The new Labour government believes nationalisation is the answer - but Ms Piper was prosecuted by Northern, which is already in public ownership.

If you travelled on South West Trains between October 2015 and August 2017, you may have been charged twice for your journey. If so, you could claim compensation of £100 or more, and up to £30 without any proof of purchase, as the company has agreed to a £25 million settlement. The legal team managing the claim has a short [survey](#) for passengers who may have been affected.

...and now the rest of the news...

An RAIB [investigation](#) into the recent collision in Wales found that the train to Aberystwyth had failed to stop in the loop to allow the other to pass. A wheel slide started when the driver braked as it neared the loop, and continued after he applied the emergency brake. The train then exited the loop on a descending gradient and continued to slide for over half a mile before colliding with the train to Shrewsbury. Contrary to early reports, both trains were moving at the time of the collision. On inspection, the hoses that should have automatically sprayed sand when the wheel slide was detected were found to be blocked and had failed to function.

Belfast’s new £340m Grand Central Station opened on 13 October. The transport hub has eight railway platforms and 26 bus stands, so all the main public transport services in the city are now under one roof.

To electrify the East Kilbride line, the track needs to be lowered under various bridges, so no trains will run beyond Thornliebank from 25 January until 18 May. Hairmyres station is being relocated to accommodate more double tracking, and East Kilbride station rebuilt and extended.

Angel Trains, Hitachi Rail and TransPennine Express are celebrating the successful completion of the UK's first intercity battery trial. The 700kW battery matches the weight of a diesel engine and is installed in the same undercarriage space, ensuring no risk of track degradation and no impact on the passenger environment. Key objectives included:

- Fuel costs savings between 35%-50%, surpassing previous predictions of up to 30%.
- Powering the train to speeds greater than 75mph, and entering and exiting stations to improve air quality and reduce noise pollution.
- Achieving all journey times and timetable and performance requirements to meet operators requirements.

During the trial, the train ran solely in battery mode for 45 miles, plenty to cover bridges, tunnels, stations, and final stretches of routes. The next stage is to deliver a full intercity battery-electric train with a range of 60-90 miles.

ORR has called on NR to deliver an improvement plan for its Eastern Region by 20 December, as delays have risen from 2.4 million to 3.3 million minutes annually over the past two years. While the Anglia route generally performs well, the ECML, the East Midlands route, and London Overground's Mildmay line that is also used by freight services have all declined.

Midlands Connect claims that just 3% of journeys between Leicester and Coventry are made by rail as they take up to 70mins with a change at Nuneaton. It is making a business case for a Coventry - Nottingham service that it believes could increase the proportion to 30% by cutting the time for this journey to just 30mins. However, the new route would need Government approval.

Between April and June this year, Transport for Wales provided 7.6 million journeys compared to 6 million in the same period the previous year. The 27% rise, the largest of any UK train operator, can be put down to a number of factors including:

- 26 brand new trains introduced by April 2023, and 57 by April 2024
- Additional services on the Wrexham to Bidston line; reopening of the Treherbert line; a new Ebbw Vale - Newport service, and major events in Cardiff
- Increased reliability: punctuality up 8.1%, and cancellations down 3.2%
- Roll out of Pay As You Go extended in south east Wales
- Introduction of Advance fares across much of the network, available up to and on the day of travel.

The new town being developed on the north side of Waterbeach, between Cambridge and Ely, will have a [new station](#) to replace the current one. Homes England will contribute £23m to the move, and the Greater Cambridge Partnership, which oversees the project, has pledged a further £20m.

EWR is planning to electrify just part of the line, with trains using hybrid batteries. A non-statutory consultation will run from 14 November to 24 January. There is no Aylesbury spur.

Together with the Thomas Pocklington Trust and its Accessibility Advisory Panel, GTR has released an [audio guide](#) for its Class 700 Thameslink trains that gives visually impaired customers the confidence to travel independently.

NR's [Wiltshire Rail Strategic Study](#) foresees hourly services from Bristol Temple Meads - Oxford; Paddington - Westbury via a new station at Devizes Gateway; and Swindon - Westbury, a local service that could be extended to Frome and Taunton, and/or Salisbury and Southampton. Although it also runs via Westbury, Bristol - Weymouth was excluded as GWR and the Western Gateway STB are already making the case for an hourly service on this route.

NR Property has dismissed architects Herzog & de Meuron after their scheme for a 21-storey building above the Grade II-listed Liverpool Street Station had over 2,200 objections. ACME will now make a new proposal based on its operational needs and historic significance. [Feedback](#) on possible improvements is invited to 4 December, and a planning application is due next year.

The London Legacy Development Corporation has approved NR Property's [Freight Campus Masterplan](#) to regenerate over 30 acres of brownfield land at Bow Goods Yard in East London into a rail freight and logistics hub that could take up to 90,000 HGV movements a year off the road. The site would also include a range of sport and leisure facilities, and food and beverage outlets to complement those on the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park.

...and finally

RIBA has awarded this year's Stirling Prize, the UK's most prestigious for architecture, to the Elizabeth Line and its 10 new stations. RIBA President, Muyiwa Oki, described it as "a slick suite of architectural components, beautifully choreographed to create a consistent, line-wide identity. Descending into the colossal network of tunnels feels like entering a portal to the future, where the typical commuter chaos is transformed into an effortless experience."

Maghull station on the Merseyrail network was voted the best in Britain in the final of this year's World Cup of Stations competition run by the Rail Delivery Group, beating King's Lynn in Norfolk, and Dorridge in the West Midlands. Maghull's success was put down to its station team and the volunteers who keep it looking pristine, and to its cafe, The Coffee Carriage, which opened in 2024 and has become a community hub for both commuters and residents.

CONSULTATIONS

- Devon & Torbay Local Transport Plan 4 ([URL: devon.cc/ltp4](http://devon.cc/ltp4)), closes 30 November.
- DfT: [Closure of Ravensthorpe station](#), closes 5 January.
- East West Rail: [Non-statutory consultation](#), closes 24 January.
- North East Mayor: [Local Transport Plan for NE Combined Authority](#), closes 26 January.

Please advise [Roger Blake](#) of any other consultation, eg that of a local transport authority.

EVENTS

Please keep your events coming, and update websites with any changes as soon as they are made. Also copy [Roger Blake](#), who maintains lists of [Events](#) and [Rail Dates](#) on the Rf website.

Blob colour indicates the type of event:

- Rf events (RUGs are cordially invited).
- National & regional rail events.
- Local Group events.

November

- Saturday 16. Rf London & South East, Herts & Beds division, St Paul's Church, Hatfield Road, **St Albans**, 1100 (Also 12 December, Online, 1930).
- Saturday 16. Rf London & South East, Kent Division, **Online**, 1400.
- Thursday 21. Friends of the Barton Line, No 1 Inn, No 1 Inn, **Cleethorpes**, 1900 (**NB** Change of venue, date and time).
- Thursday 21. Rf London & South East, London Metro division, 75 Cowcross Street, **Farringdon**, 1900.
- Tuesday 26. Levenmouth Rail Campaign, Fife Renewables Innovation Centre, Ajax Way, **Methil**, Leven, KY8 3RS and **Online**, 1830. (Also the last Tuesday of alternate months).
- Saturday 30. Joint Rf North West/Yorkshire branches, Friends Meeting House, Mount Street, **Manchester**, M2 5NS, 1300.

December

- Tuesday 3. Chesham & District Transport Users' Group, Chesham Town Hall, Parsonage Lane, **Chesham**, Bucks, HP5 1EP, 1930.
- Thursday 5. Rf London & South East, Sussex & Coastway division, **Online** (Also 9 January in Lewes).
- Saturday 7. Rf East Anglia, The Signal Box Community Centre, Glenalmond Avenue, **Cambridge** CB2 8DB.
- Tuesday 10. Support The Oldham Rochdale Manchester Rail Lines Group, The Blue Pits Inn, 842 Manchester Road, Castleton, **Rochdale**, OL11 2SP, 1400.

Further Ahead

- 15 January. Rf London & South East, Eastern division, **Online**, 1900.
- 28 January. CRN AGM, **Online**, 1400 (change of date).

Disclaimer: unless otherwise stated, views expressed are those of the contributor, and not necessarily shared by Rf.

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