

Chairman's Message



Welcome to our latest Wessex Newsletter, letting you know what campaigns we have been pursuing on your behalf. The usual plea: we could do so much more if we had more helpers. We look with envy at branches who have achieved so much more due to having more help and support.

Parliamentary Reception

On Tuesday 3 February I attended this Railfuture event at the House of Commons to launch 'A Growth Opportunity for Railways', our discussion paper on the impacts and potential for Great British Railway. Read the document here: <https://www.railfuture.org.uk/display4276>

The board had been planning this for some time to try to influence politicians. We had a good attendance from MPs and industry representatives, although it was unfortunate that our reception coincided with the committee stage of the Railways Bill so several key attendees could not make our reception. We have subsequently emailed a copy of our document to them and others who were unable to attend. I would commend reading the document we circulated as in many respects it sets out our strategy for a better and bigger railway. Please don't get too excited about the new railcard proposal - it's not policy but was intended to illustrate how the rail industry needs to reconsider its approach to ticketing in the digital age.

SWR timetable refresh

We've been here before and nothing has changed but perhaps there is hope. South Western Railway has announced it is about to consult on a timetable refresh. I have already been approached by a consultancy undertaking a research project on behalf of SWR and Network Rail Wessex to understand views on the timetable transformation, the upcoming consultation, and the opportunities that this will bring.

I made our position clear. Our aims as regularly stated are...

- the re-instatement of the pre covid timetable of four trains off-peak per hour from Portsmouth and from Southampton to Waterloo.
- to reinstate late evening services both up and down to/from London.
- to increase revenue by attracting additional or returning passengers (we suggest the aim should be to reduce the public subsidy rather than just cutting costs).
- to improve local connectivity notably between stations in the New Forest and Poole, and in the South Hampshire area.

Our colleagues from the London & SouthEast branch together with our Chair, Chris Page, met with SWR. Chris reported back that the 'goal' of the SWR timetable recast is the concept of an 'economic value triangle', which has components of customer, performance and net subsidy. However, it's not clear at this stage how these elements come together. Some risk may need to be taken to grow revenue and opportunities.

Cross Country

Our campaign for Brockenhurst stops to be reinstated has paid off. These are now in the timetable from May. We continue to raise capacity issues with Cross Country Trains. A five-coach train should be a minimum with double units for more heavily used services. We appear to have returned to some services with only four coaches.

We continue to give Cross Country our support for the DfT to reallocate suitable rolling stock to supplement their existing fleet to improve capacity. Ultimately Great British Railways will need to acquire new rolling stock for XC services to make them attractive to passengers but it is good news that they will call at Brockenhurst again from May.

Open Access

Whilst at the Parliamentary reception I caught up with Ian Yeowart and discussed his (ie Alliance Rail's) open access proposals for services from Marchwood to Southampton with some trains continuing to Waterloo. He has shared a draft timetable which demonstrates progress but it is still under discussion.

Car Parking

Railfuture has always believed we need to look at the complete end to end journey experience, preferably getting to/from the station by bus or cycle but we have to accept in some cases this is just not achievable. We were therefore disappointed to learn from posters at various rural stations, such as my own at Shawford, that car park charges would now be introduced. I pointed out that many of these rural stations are in areas of poor mobile phone coverage and their one solitary ticket vending machine is often out of order.

We also understand car park charges in general are due to go up by 9.7%. Using a third-party car park operator just adds an extra level of complexity (one app for rail tickets and another for car parking) and tension (hassle of finding a parking space then trying to get a signal).

Photo: M Southgate



I estimated when changing trains at Southampton Airport Parkway that most of the upper floors of the multi-story had capacity. We have pointed out that perhaps reduced parking charges at such out-of-city-centre locations off peak could be used to encourage rather than discourage rail travel.

Mike Southgate

West of England Line

The West of England via Salisbury to Exeter line has suffered more than its fair share of climatic problems over the past year: last summer we had “soil moisture deficit” leading to track deformation, then leaves on the line causing wheel flats in the autumn (poor vegetation management to blame), and then flooding in the early weeks of 2026. It all points to the need for a greater spend on infrastructure maintenance.

The Railfuture-affiliated Salisbury-Exeter Rail Users’ Group (SERUG) has submitted a 7-point Vision statement to South Western Railway. At the top of the list is an early decision on replacement rolling stock and on the power source for the new trains – only then can progress be made on other matters, such as depot facilities at Salisbury and timetable enhancements. The group wants to see a start made on improvements to track, signalling and platforms at Salisbury. The Vision statement also calls for the construction of passing loops in the Whimble and Tisbury areas which (together with upgrades at Exeter Central and St David’s) would unlock the full Dorset Metro level of service. Emergency repairs to an embankment took place near Axminster over the weekend of 16/17 January. SERUG questioned why a Honiton-Exeter shuttle could not have operated during the closure. Apparently, there are insufficient resources at Exeter to do this ... which makes implementation of Devon Metro all the more essential!

SERUG’s Chair Bruce Duncan, was interviewed by Rail Magazine columnist Paul Clifton for a 2-page article in a recent edition of the journal. Bruce concludes: “We love our little diesel trains. They potter up and down. They break down. The planned overhaul is only a temporary answer. By the time they’re replaced they will be 45 years old. You simply can’t have long-distance inter-city trains that old, that unreliable and that expensive to maintain.”

At SERUG’s AGM in January, SWR’s Customer and Commercial Director, Peter Williams, assured members that the West of England line would feature prominently in the company’s forthcoming Business Plan, due out in the coming weeks. Mr Williams also mentioned that they were looking at increasing the amount of rolling stock available for the line, which includes the possibility of acquiring more class 158s from Transport for Wales.

Island Line

A spoof citation for the line most often shut for repairs was awarded last December by transport expert Roger French in his *Bus & Train User* blog ...

WINNER The Island Line: it was previously closed between January and November 2021 and then between October 2022 and July 2023, followed by a further shut down between September 2024 and May 2025 when it finally reopened for what everyone hoped would be an uninterrupted long period of operation. Except it shut down again this autumn between 18 October and 2nd November with a partial closure (north of Ryde St Johns Road) from 2nd November to 17th November, including a full line closure on 16th November.

After seeing this our man on the Island, Stuart George, remarked: ...and Island Line has had a reduced service "due to staff shortage" each morning this week. Completely unacceptable with the 40 min interval service. Even Southern Vectis has now restricted the hours their buses are available as a replacement, presumably to ensure their regular passengers aren't left behind when the buses are full of rail passengers.

Why is our railway so unreliable?

One of the current mantras of rail industry leaders and senior transport politicians is that they want to see “a boringly reliable railway”. Well, they are right, that’s what users want to see too, but for too many the actual experience is the opposite. It seems to me, from bitter experience, that a journey that goes to plan is the exception, rather than the norm on today’s railway. If it is important, I have started to take the train before I need to, just to have some prospect of getting to my destination on time.

So why is this, when in terms of expenditure, the railway now costs a lot more to maintain and renew than it ever did in BR days? There is massive disruption almost every weekend with renewal works and an increasing tendency to even have weekday blockages for maintenance activity, as Railfuture members in Wessex will very well know. Blockages of 10 days covering 2 weekends and the intervening week are now quite commonplace. Surely with all this activity the railway should be much more reliable? It is after all causing massive inconvenience to rail users with the dreaded “alternative rail replacement bus service”.

I think there are 3 main reasons why the train has become so unreliable, and they are mostly nothing to do with money.

Firstly, the risk aversion that now permeates the industry results in trains being halted for reasons that in the past would not have been tolerated. For example, a report of a trespasser now seems to stop all trains, often for a long time. Why? Yes, trains should not proceed at line speed, but whatever happened to running “at caution”? The progressive tightening of the rules relating to track safety now means that almost any activity on or near the line requires trains to be stopped. The result of this is that what is known in the industry as DPI (delay per incident) has risen progressively over the years. The railway is not less reliable technically, it just deals with disruptive events less effectively.

Secondly there has been a progressive “deskilling” of the workforce in respect of operational response. Time was that station staff were competent to wind points, operate electrical isolation switches, operate level crossings on local control etc. Privatisation and the fragmentation of the railway destroyed that under the somewhat spurious pretext of safety and financial liability. We now have the daft situation where instead of local staff getting trains moving, they stay on the platforms and apologise for the fact that there are no trains! Is that really what rail users want?

The third reason is the lack of industry leadership at local level. Cost reduction has progressively removed staff in the supervisory and junior management grades, people who in reality made the railway run. Yes, to some extent they are an overhead, but they are in truth an insurance policy that when things go wrong roll up their sleeves and direct others and lead by example. Far too often now you see confusion at local level because nobody is in charge and people stand around waiting to be told what to do because they are lacking in both competence and confidence to use their initiative.

The industry does potentially have an opportunity to put some of these things right with the creation of GBR. My concern is that I see little sign that these shortcomings are even understood by politicians and industry leaders. This is not about high level industry structure or spending more money, it is about creating an organisation that works operationally and this requires a different mindset and a much more balanced approach to the overall assessment of risk.

- *Stewart Palmer.*

Station Usage Statistics

Each year, the Office of Rail and Road (ORR) publishes a list of stations in Britain with station usage figures alongside. The figures represent estimated totals of station entries, exits and interchanges based primarily on ticket sales.

From the ORR list for Apr 24 to Mar 25, we've sifted out our own list of stations in the Wessex branch area; we can let you have a copy on application to the branch secretary.

- *Here are the **Top Ten** stations in our branch area...*

Southampton Central (6,172,960); Basingstoke (4,793,820); Winchester (4,593,936); Bournemouth (2,664,456); Farnborough Main (2,235,212); Portsmouth Harbour (2,091,304); Havant (2,082,866); Fratton (2,080,340); Salisbury (2,004,688); Fareham (1,740,046).

- *Here are the **Bottom Five**, ie the least used stations. The first two are on the Isle of Wight and the other three are request stops on the Heart of Wessex Line...*

Brading (17,080); Smallbrook Junction (8,978); Yetminster (7,088); Chetnole (2,638); Thornford (2,312).

- *Most stations show a healthy increase in patronage over the previous year (2023-24). Here are the top ten **Increases**...*

Woolston (up 73.7%); Overton (up 44.2%); Holton Heath (up 32.7%); Grateley (up 31%); Dean (up 27.3%); Southbourne (up 26.5%); Ryde Pier Head (up 25.5%); Millbrook (up 25.1%); Beaulieu Road (up 23.7%); Warblington (up 23.5%).

Woolston now enjoys an extra two trains an hour each way on the Southern service between Southampton and Brighton, hence the whopping increase. At Overton and Grateley, no doubt passenger numbers were boosted by restoration of the full Salisbury-Waterloo service following representations from users including Railfuture.

- *Only six stations in our area are shown to have **Decreases** in patronage...*

Thornford (down 30.8%); Bedhampton (down 14.8%); Whitchurch (down 10%); Portsmouth & Southsea (down 8.6%); Ryde St Johns Road (down 6.9%); Yetminster (down 6.1%).

There are usually local factors at play causing some of the larger fluctuations from year to year, for example long closures for engineering works.

Fareham and Gosport Transport Strategy

Last November, the Wessex Branch of Railfuture had the opportunity to comment on Hampshire County Council's draft Fareham and Gosport Transport Strategy.

Our main observation was that the proposed new railway station for Welborne (north of Fareham) had not been specifically mentioned in the document. We said that the station would be essential for improving public transport links, enabling sustainable growth and enabling walking, cycling and active lifestyles.

We expressed support for various aspects of the strategy, most notably: improved access to Fareham, Portchester and Swanwick railway stations for pedestrians, cyclists and buses, and the delivery of step free access at Portchester and Swanwick stations. We also cited the need for improvements to train services and frequencies at Fareham, Portchester and Swanwick stations.

Pokesdown Lifts: the Ups and Downs

A welcome announcement at the start of 2026 was that work to install new lifts at Pokesdown station near Bournemouth would begin later this year, a mere nine years since First/MTR agreed to fund the project during their tenure of the South Western Railway franchise (now ended). Pokesdown station is in a deep cutting, so only the very fit are able to access the platforms via its long staircases. The old lifts have been out of use for over 40 years.

Funding for the overall scheme was dependent upon a £2.6m contribution from BCP Council. But in February, the Lib Dem/Independent council administration decided they could no longer afford to meet their share of the cost.

South Western Railway (now publicly owned) swiftly issued a statement deploring the Council's decision, saying it put the entire project in jeopardy. Opposition councillors and the Labour MP for Bournemouth East then waded in with their own condemnation of the Council. AFC Bournemouth also expressed an interest in seeing the scheme go ahead as their Vitality stadium lies within walking distance of Pokesdown station.

Justifying their position, BCP Council said: "Rail stations and their infrastructure are the responsibility of national rail bodies. Our residents should not be expected to subsidise what is ultimately the remit of Network Rail and Great British Railways".

It was thought that the project could still go ahead if some of the "nice to have" improvements such as upgrades to the station building were stripped out. However, the latest news is that the MP has persuaded the Government to stump up the £2.5m shortfall so that the work can get underway this summer.

Hooray!! – but maybe hold off uncorking the champagne for a little while yet.

Letter to the Editor

I was very interested to see the departure board in the latest issue of the Wessex Branch newsletter. This was presumably photographed at Fratton - as Havant is the next stop? I have a slide of just such a train, taken by myself. It shows Class 47 No. 47.492 at Havant with the 12.15 to Liverpool Lime Street on 20th November 1983.

- Adrian Willats.



Thanks Adrian. Those were the days! - real inter-city stock. The departure board was actually photographed in my garden, but is thought to have come from Portsmouth & Southsea Station. It has since been donated (along with some other railway items) to the North Dorset Railway museum at Shillingstone. – *Tony S.*



Portsmouth-Liverpool direct
Departure board advertising one of several direct trains which used to run from our area (as featured in our Autumn 2025 newsletter)

Planned Engineering Works

We all know that engineering works on the network are necessary from time to time, and we have no option but to resign ourselves to the added inconvenience of a service diversion or the dreaded rail replacement bus.

Closures of recent months have been noteworthy for the wide geographical spread of disruption when only a relatively small area is under engineering possession. One weekend during works at Southampton there were no trains at all between Eastleigh and Bournemouth, not even the usual shuttle on the Lymington branch – and to make matters worse, it coincided with a prolonged closure on the route via Guildford and Havant.

We need to question the arrangements when major works are announced in future and make sure that passengers are at the forefront of planning decisions.

Sway Station Survey

Sway Station adoption group conducted a passenger survey through their website and Facebook page in November and December of 2025. They were pleased to receive very nearly 200 replies – not bad in a community of around 3500 people.



The group managed to reach most demographics with their questionnaire other than under 18's (key rail users, especially for Brockenhurst College) – addressing this will be a challenge for any future survey. A report complete with helpful bar charts and conclusions was prepared and widely circulated. One problem highlighted in the report was the saga of trying to adjust the timetable for Highcliffe School which, if resolvable, would save parents considerable sums of money.

Overall satisfaction with the train service scored 3.7 out of 5, with 58% satisfied ...but 12% strongly dissatisfied, identifying key improvement areas. Customer service and staff helpfulness scored highest, averaging above 4.5, reflecting positive passenger interactions. Ticket value for money scored lowest at around 2.5 out of 5, with concerns about delays, cancellations, and complex pricing structures. There was also concern about station opening hours.

Overall however, passengers want the service to succeed. The feedback was not hostile but improvement-focused, suggesting that addressing reliability, communication, and comfort would unlock greater usage and satisfaction.

People completing the survey had space to write their own comments. Many complained about the price of tickets: "Cost of journey is really expensive. I would use it more if cheaper." Reliability was also a common theme with one person saying: "Trains are cancelled at the last minute - on two occasions this year I have been on my way to medical appointments when the train, which has been 'running on time' has been cancelled within 10 minutes of arriving!"

Proposed actions resulting from the exercise include increasing service frequency, extending schedules, improving station facilities for disabled and cyclists, and simplifying fare structures. The group particularly wants to see better connections to key destinations like Southampton and Brockenhurst. Poole is also a popular destination for employment, entertainment, shops and the hospital; what was (pre-Covid) a 35-minute journey time now takes nearly an hour with a change of trains needed en route.

Other News in Brief

The Dept. for Transport's programme of re-nationalisation is continuing, with the next former franchise, **Govia Thameslink Railway**, set to be taken over by DfT Operator on 31 May. GTR run Southern services into Portsmouth and Southampton. – gov.uk

Network Rail has signed a collaborative agreement with the **Mid Hants (Watercress) Line**. NR will use the Watercress Line's facilities to deliver practical coaching for employees and apprentices, focusing on maintenance, inspection, and fault-finding across a range of railway assets. In return, the heritage line will benefit from NR's in-kind expertise and support (staff are encouraged to use their volunteering leave to assist with maintenance and operations), plus donations of redundant railway assets. The agreement commits both organisations to regular meetings to deepen their partnership, align activities and explore new opportunities for collaboration. - NR

Swanage Railway has plans to introduce a diesel shuttle service on its heritage line between Corfe Castle and a newly-built platform near Furzebrook giving access to the popular Blue Pool tourist attraction. It's not the connection to the main line at Wareham that we're all hoping for, but at least it would make use of part of their northern extension while providing a useful shuttle between Corfe Castle and the Park & Ride site at Norden. There's still much work to do, so there's a risk the new service won't be ready for the 2026 season.

The **Station Heritage Artefacts** website (<https://stationheritageartefacts.org.uk/>) is an online register of historic artefacts at British mainline railway stations set up by Daniel Wright, author and editor of thebeautyoftransport.com and a long-time enthusiast for railway heritage. There's an A-Z search facility so you can find what it says about your local station, and instructions on how to upload a photo and description of something you think should be added. (*I've just uploaded a photo of the tank loading ramp at Wool station in Dorset – Tony S.*)

DP World is making a £60m investment in the UK's trading capacity with an order of four new quay cranes for its **Southampton container terminal**. The new cranes will be the largest quay cranes in Europe and can perform quad lifts, moving two 40ft containers together from ship to yard in a single move, reducing the time taken to load and unload large container vessels. The quay cranes, which stand taller than Big Ben and each weigh more than 2,000 tonnes, are scheduled to arrive from mid-2026. – *dpworld.com*

Brittany Ferries has officially launched a new **piggyback rail service** transporting semi-trailers 970km from the port of Cherbourg to Bayonne near the Spanish border. The trains could remove 25,000 lorry movements a year from French roads. The service forms part of a broader multimodal corridor linking maritime traffic from the United Kingdom and Ireland via the port of Cherbourg with southern France and Spain. *-from Brittany Ferries press release We had written to port managers at Portsmouth and Poole about whether the carriage of trailers by rail will be replicated on the UK side of the channel. But now there's news in Rail magazine that "Network Rail contractors are clearing vegetation on the Hamworthy branch to reopen the line to Poole docks for new trailer traffic via Cherbourg." That's fantastic news!*

In a Rail magazine article about the need to provide extra capacity on the Exeter-Barnstaple line, GWR's Head of Strategic Development is quoted as saying that trains "are just as busy as some of the very worst **Portsmouth-Cardiff** services – ones people physically can't physically fit onto." *Well, thanks for that! – we've complained for years that Portsmouth-Cardiff trains are inadequate, so perhaps get on and tackle those first!!*

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