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Welcome to the Rail User Express

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Prior to the general election on 4 July, no new policy can be announced or controversial decisions taken. But whichever party forms the new Government, it needs to pick up the ball and run with it. Too many much-needed rail schemes have been sat on the shelf for far too long.

Roger Smith

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

Friends of the Far North Line

The six-week trial in 2020, when trains took timber from Georgemas Junction to Inverness for processing at the West Fraser factory near Inverness Airport, is now bearing fruit. In 2021, the Highland Council gave planning permission for a loading facility at Altnabreac; in 2022, the points and signalling needed to access the Dalcross factory were installed as part of the Inverness Airport Station works, and West Fraser now has planning permission for a loading facility for rail delivery and collection. FoFNL hopes that suitable wagons will soon be procured so that timber trains become a regular feature on the Far North Line. But will it have the capacity?

The unreliability of the FNL is turning passengers away. FoFNL has campaigned for a loop between Inverness and Beaulieu for almost 20 years. NR, Transport Scotland and Scotrail all agree the need for one, but it still has to pass the dreaded business case. To justify dualling the A9, a £420m 'driver frustration' value had to be added; FoFNL hopes that the Delmore loop can attract a similar 'railway reputation' value. And the northern end of the FNL also needs an additional loop.

Lakes Line Rail User Group

LLRUG and the CRP are seeking volunteers to conduct their annual passenger survey on 28/29 June. The interviews are recorded on tablet computers; training or refresher sessions are available if required. A return journey along the whole line takes about an hour, but most volunteers opt for a two-hour slot; Northern offers free travel to and from a Lakes Line station.

Ribble Valley Rail

Northern's Stakeholder Conference was upbeat with the investigation and tendering process to replace over 300 of its older trains now underway. As these are the diesel units that presently operate the Ribble Valley services, RVR is hopeful of seeing the new trains - but not until 2028 at the earliest, when the various power options have been evaluated, tested and the trains built.

Longer trains with more capacity, particularly necessary between Blackburn and Manchester, required longer platforms at several stations, but the programme to lengthen them progressively from the Bolton end ran out of money, leaving Langho, Whalley, and Clitheroe with short platforms, so passengers at this end of the line have to travel only in the front two carriages. RVR will continue to press for the completion of this programme.

To improve its rail connectivity, Northern offered three routes for “service uplifts” including Rochdale - Clitheroe. The line has enough capacity for a half-hourly service to every station from Blackburn, and for a further extension to Hellifield, each of which would require two more 2-car units for an additional diagram, plus staffing for the half-hourly service. The Hellifield extension would also need a signalling upgrade. Up to 133,000 more passengers each year were forecast, with a £0.7m revenue uplift, user and non-user benefits of £2.1m, and 1.9m fewer car-kilometres, all at a projected operating cost of £5.5m using existing rolling stock.

Support The Oldham Rochdale Manchester lines

FirstGroup has applied to the ORR for an open access service from London Euston to Rochdale via Warrington Bank Quay, Newton-le-Willows, Eccles and Manchester Victoria, with six Lumo trains a day. It hopes the first direct service from Rochdale to London since 2000 will start by 2027. However, Richard Branson’s Virgin Group has submitted a rival bid for open access services from Euston to Birmingham, Manchester and Rochdale as well as to Liverpool and Glasgow.

Shrewsbury-Chester Rail Users' Association

SCRUA hopes to save the Holyhead - Birmingham International service via Chester, Wrexham General, Telford and Wolverhampton. Transport for Wales proposes to bring it forward 15mins and divert it to Cardiff. Passengers travelling to stations en route to Birmingham would need to change at Shrewsbury. SCRUA volunteers canvassed over 40 passengers at Gobowen. The overwhelming majority were opposed to both the retiming and rerouting, irrespective of whether they were travelling to Shrewsbury or beyond.

Steve Boulding, Chair of SCRUA said: “This is not the first time that we have needed to campaign to protect services in England run by TfW. None of the passengers we spoke to were heading towards Cardiff or west Wales. Passengers described the extra hassle of a change at an already busy station, the potential for further delays and cancellation, and a lack of seats and workspaces on what may prove to be a shorter train. Those travelling with luggage, especially the elderly, were particularly keen to preserve the current arrangement. We trust that TfW will understand the importance to the local economy and passengers of preserving this service to Birmingham.”

Friends of the Barton Line

TPE’s 1719 Liverpool - Cleethorpes service now calls at Habrough, and there is a new Saturday service from Cleethorpes to Doncaster at 2122. In December or next May, Northern will withdraw its Doncaster - Scunthorpe service. Instead, alternate TPE services will call additionally at Althorpe, Crowle and Thorne South, so passengers for the Barton line will no longer have to change at Scunthorpe. FBL Chairman Tom Irvin has asked TPE for ‘Connections’ fares from Barton line stations to major TPE destinations, and to retime its service to allow Northern’s eastbound Brigg Line service on weekdays to call at Habrough.

British Regional Transport Association

BRTA is enlisting support to rebuild the Northampton - Market Harborough Rail Link (N2MH) to reduce chronic congestion and air pollution, and make for more sustainable development. It presently takes over 90mins with two changes to go by train from Leicester to Northampton. However, a suppressed and redacted NR report from 2020 showed that N2MH would cut this to 34mins even with 3 stops.

Fen Line Users Association

GTR has agreed in principle to lease 30 Class 379 units for the Fen Line that once ran to King's Lynn from Liverpool Street. Though 3 years older than the Class 387s, they already have wi-fi, and there are no plans to alter their internal layout or replace their more comfortable seating.

The Government inspector ruling on the TWAO for Cambridge re-signalling has refused the "upgrading" of Waterbeach level crossing. Without a footbridge and full barriers staying down longer, some passengers could miss their train. FLUA Chair John Grant and Jerry Alderson undoubtedly helped the inquiry reach this welcome decision.

Great Northern declined FLUA's request to allow the carriage of bicycles on earlier trains into Cambridge in the morning peak, but is monitoring the situation. FLUA believes that the 0742 from King's Lynn could relieve Greater Anglia's service that departs Ely for Stansted at 0828, which has room for only 6 bikes, so cyclists are often turned away.

Bedford Commuters Association

A combination of staff shortages and skip stopping has led to far too many cancellations to evening Thameslink services between Luton and Bedford. A BCA meeting in June with the Train Service Director and some of her team will seek an improved performance.

Later this year, Kings Heath Depot in Northampton is expected to start on refurbishing all 21 of EMR's Class 360s units that run between St Pancras and Corby. They will be standard class only, with 2+2 seating in the same style as the new Aurora Intercity trains, increased luggage space, charging points, and a new passenger information system.

Thameslink, EMR and NR have approved a network change document to introduce the new Wixams station into all NR systems, so detailed design work can now start. However, timescales for its construction and an opening date are still awaited.

As the nominated operator for East West Rail (EWR), Chiltern hopes to start an Oxford - Milton Keynes service next May - but with just a two-car service every half hour. BCA predicts the trains will be very crowded!

RAILFUTURE

Rf welcomes new members, both individual and groups: the more we are, the more weight to its campaigns. Join [here](#): from the "Membership Types" menu top right, select either the appropriate category of individual or, to affiliate, select "RUG or similar". Read the latest from Rf on [News and views](#), [Press releases](#), [Railfuture in the news](#), and [Consultation responses](#).



Nominations for the RUG Awards have closed. However, those for the Rf Member of the Year Award that will also be presented at the AGM in Edinburgh on 13 July, remain open until 1 July. All individual Rf members (not RUGs) are eligible. So if you know of one who has contributed to the success of Rf, raised its profile in their local area, or helped to run their local branch, Rf would like to hear about them in a statement of no more than 500 words explaining why they deserve to be recognised. For further details of the Rf Award, or to submit a nomination, please email the Membership Director at wendy.thorne@railfuture.org.uk.

NEWS

During the election campaign period, Rf is asking candidates one question a week via social media. How will your government:

- Ensure that both passenger and freight rail users are put first in future?
- Attract more passengers to use rail?
- Use rail to help meet UK carbon reduction targets?
- Simplify the rail industry to improve accountability and reduce costs?
- Ensure that rail provides value for money to taxpayers while improving the quality of rail services?
- Maximise the opportunities for rail to support economic growth, provide access to employment and education, and improve health and social inclusion?

The public consultation on the Bedford - Cambridge section of EWR prior to the application for a Development Consent Order (DCO) won't now start until after the election. With the full route linking to many other main lines, it is a national project of potential value to everyone. So do respond to the inquiry with your support to counter opposition to the project.

RF EAST ANGLIA

In 2023, Jonathan Roberts Consulting produced a [paper](#) for RfEA on the feasibility of restoring a rail service from Haverhill to Cambridge; it is most encouraging for both towns. RfEA has briefed local councillors and council officers accordingly, as well as the Cambridge Delivery Group and Greater Cambridge Partnership, NR and Greater Anglia. The feedback has been very positive.

With two statutory consultations, a month to accept the DCO, a three-month Pre-Examination, a six-month Examination, three months for the planning inspector to make a recommendation and another for the Secretary of State's decision, and then a further six weeks to allow for a Judicial Review, the legal process to approve EWR between Bedford and Cambridge could take another 3 years. Contrast that with the time it took to approve the "Bacon Factory Chord" linking the East Suffolk line with the main line to Norwich, so freight trains from Felixstowe bound for the Midlands and the North can bypass London.

NR finally included the project in its plans for CP4 (2009-2014). The 2010 general election delayed the consultation processes, but less than a day was needed for the Public Examination - the fastest ever DCO to be granted - and the Secretary of State duly signed it off in September 2012. Just 18 months remained to the end of CP4, but wildlife surveys and other preliminary measures had been done in advance, so contractors were on site in no time. The first train ran with a week to spare! It is a perfect example of how a railway project can be delivered on time and on budget with a willing local authority and local political support.

The 18 or so trains a day prior to the Chord opening in 2014 are now up to 38, and many more could use it but Ely and Haughley junctions are at full capacity. It proves that investment in the freight railway pays handsomely. Ministers have promised to upgrade both junctions on numerous occasions but no money has yet been forthcoming. The DfT said it was committed to their delivery: "NR has developed both schemes to outline business case stage, and we will set out next steps soon on further investment for their development and delivery."

COMMUNITY RAIL NETWORK

This year's 'More Than A Railway' campaign aimed to spark nationwide curiosity in community rail, and spotlight the benefits of the grassroots movement. Over 100 activities showcased how it increases access to opportunity, gives communities a voice on rail, bolsters sustainable travel and tourism, tackles social isolation, and puts railways and stations at the heart of community life. CRN will now introduce community rail to the newly elected mayors, and ensure it is best placed to offer insights as they start in their new roles.

Regarding footfall on the Bentham Line, Leeds-Morecambe CRP Chairman Gerald Townson observed: "Comparing the latest figures with those from previous years, our analysis shows that there has been further positive recovery throughout the route in 2022-23 since Covid restrictions were lifted. It is our most rural stations - Wennington, Bentham, Clapham, Giggleswick, Long Preston and Gargrave - that have recovered better than the larger towns and cities at both ends of the line [and] exceeded the footfall figures from 2019-20, prior to the pandemic."

CAMPAIGN FOR BETTER TRANSPORT

CBT campaigns for policy to reduce emissions, and thus get cleaner air with less environmental impact. But individual action plays a role too. The more of us who speak up about the changes we need, the closer we will get to sustainable transport that works for everyone, everywhere.

"Better Transport Week is all about celebrating sustainable transport, and I'm absolutely on board for that! Trains, coaches and buses can be a wonderful way to travel, enjoy the view and arrive refreshed, while helping to tackle air pollution and climate change." – CBT Patron Jenny Agutter.

TRANSPORT FOCUS

Transport is woven into the fabric of our everyday lives; it sets the boundaries of where we can go and what we can do. Reliable, affordable and accessible public transport is for many people the difference between being able to participate fully in society and being excluded from it. TF's new [Business Plan](#) seeks to ensure that transport is run in the interest of the people who use it.

TF took up a complaint from a wheelchair user who had asked Transport for Wales why its rail replacement service to Bidston, a station only accessible by steps, could not be extended to step-free Birkenhead North, also operated by Merseyrail, adding under 5mins to the journey time. After an approach to both operators, Transport for Wales confirmed that it would extend all future bus replacements to Bidston to Birkenhead North.

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

Given the number of drivers due to retire in the next five years, the minimum age to drive trains on Britain's railways could be reduced from 20 to 18. School leavers would be able to take up apprenticeships to become drivers. ASLEF General Secretary Mick Whelan said the union had always been in favour of lowering the age drivers can start training: there should be sufficient to cover every shift without relying on rest day working and overtime.

Angel Trains, Hitachi Rail and TPE have collaborated to retrofit a five-carriage Class 802 Intercity train with a battery with a peak power of more than 700kW, enough to deliver the same levels of acceleration and performance as the diesel engine it replaces, while being no heavier. It will be trialled on Transpennine routes this summer.

The East Coast Digital Programme achieved a significant milestone when DB Cargo's locomotive 66039 began dynamic testing at NRI's Rail Innovation and Development Centre in Leicestershire. And following an overhaul, Tornado has arrived at Great Central Railway in Loughborough for testing and proving work, bringing it one step closer to being the first steam locomotive in the world to operate with ETCS.

Following discussions with NR and Transport Secretary Mark Harper, Eastern Powerhouse (EP) is lobbying for a new station south of King's Lynn, on what is currently farmland south of the A47.

Launched in February to celebrate the resumption of a full train service on the Marston Vale Line between Bedford and Bletchley, London Northwestern Railway has extended its ticket promotion for a further three months until August. Thousands of passengers have taken advantage of the £1 single fare (50p for children). Services run hourly from Monday-Saturday, including Bank Holidays, but there is no Sunday service.

Using GTR's pay-as-you-go Key Smartcard, Southern, Thameslink and Great Northern customers can now travel as often as they like between the same two stations from Monday to Sunday knowing that the cost will be capped at the price of a weekly season ticket, so they won't need to work out their tickets in advance – a real benefit for more flexible working.

NR Property has a [masterplan](#) to regenerate up to 30 acres of brownfield land at Bow Goods Yard. The East London site enables the sustainable movement by rail of construction materials, including over two million tons of concrete and aggregate a year, to build schools, hospitals and housing.

The [56th edition](#) of Barry Doe's NR Operators' map adds the Leven branch and the new Northumberland Line to Ashington (opens mid-summer); removes the note regarding no service between Clitheroe and Hellifield, as DalesRail has been replaced by The Yorkshire Dales Explorer, an all-year Rochdale - Ribbleshead service on Saturdays; and shows Avanti West Coast no longer running between Wolverhampton and Shrewsbury, nor Southern north of Watford Junction. FabDigital now produces the [National Rail Timetable](#) files on behalf of NR.

...and finally

Rail enthusiast Robert Hampton has bought a Class 507 train for £1 to save it from the scrapheap. 507001 once served as a Royal Train. On 25 October 1978, after opening the Merseyrail network at Moorfields station, Queen Elizabeth II travelled on it to Kirkby. Mr Hampton has launched a crowdfunding appeal to raise the £10,000 he needs to move the unit by road to the Tanat Valley Railway at Nantmawr in Shropshire.

A blue plaque marking the 80th anniversary of D-Day has been unveiled at Swanage station, whence GIs from the 26th Infantry Regiment of the US Army's First Infantry Division embarked on what for many was a fateful journey to Omaha Beach in Normandy.

A railway worker abseiling down Dawlish cliffs got a surprise when his boot was bitten by a tawny owl nesting in his toehold. Work around the nest was stopped immediately to make sure she came to no harm. Both of the eggs she was sitting on have since hatched.

CONSULTATIONS

- Central Bedfordshire: [Local Transport Plan](#), Closes 30 June.

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.

June

■ Tuesday 18. Chesham & District Transport Users' Group, Town Hall, **Chesham**, 1930 (Also 6 August).

■ Friday 21. Campaign for Better Transport, King's College, Strand, **London**, WC2R 2LS, 0900.

■ 21-22. European Passengers' Federation, Ibis Hotel, **Warsaw**.

■ Saturday 22. Friends of the Far North Line AGM, Crown Church, Inverness, 1100.

■ Saturday 22. Rf East Anglia, St Mary's at Stoke, Stoke Street, **Ipswich**, IP2 8BX, 1400 (Also 28 September in Norwich, and 7 December in Cambridge).

■ Thursday 27. Rf London & South East, Herts & Beds division, **Online**, 1930 (Also 30 July).

■ Saturday 29. British Regional Transport Association, Benjamin Huntsman, 12-18 Cambridge Street, **Sheffield**, S1 4UD, 1400.

July

■ Monday 8. Ribble Valley Rail, The New Inn, Parson Lane, **Clitheroe**, 1900 (Also the second Monday of alternate months).

■ Monday 8. Mid Cheshire Rail Users Association AGM, Golden Pheasant, Plumley Moor Road, **Plumley**, Cheshire, WA16 9RX, 1900.

■ Monday 8. Friends of Littleborough Stations, History Room, **Littleborough** Station, 1900.

■ Wednesday 10. Rf London & South East, Eastern division. **Online**, 1900 (Also the second Wednesday of alternate months).

■ Saturday 13. Rf National AGM and RUG Awards, Holyrood Hotel, 81 Holyrood Rd, **Edinburgh**, EH8 8AU, 1100.

■ Saturday 13. British Regional Transport Association AGM, The Court House, Church Lane, **Berkhamsted**, HP4 2AX, 1400.

■ Wednesday 17. Friends of the Barton Line AGM, White Swan Inn, **Barton** Interchange, 1800 (Also 19 September, No 1 Inn, Cleethorpes).

■ Thursday 18. Rf London & South East, Sussex & Coastway division, **Haywards Heath**, West Sussex (tbc), 1800 (Also 5 September, Online).

■ Thursday 18. Rf London & South East, London Metro division, 75 Cowcross Street, **Farringdon**, 1900 (Also 19 September).

■ Tuesday 30. Levenmouth Rail Campaign, Fife Renewables Innovation Centre, Ajax Way, **Methil**, Leven, KY8 3RS and **Online**, 1830. (Also the last Tuesday of alternate months).

Further Ahead

■ 13 August. Support The Oldham Rochdale Manchester rail lines group, The Blue Pits Inn, 842 Manchester Road, Castleton, **Rochdale**, OL11 2SP, 1400.

■ 17 August. Rf London & South East, Kent Division, **Online**, 1400.

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

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