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Welcome to the Rail User Express

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At noon on New Year's Day, a Whistle-Up by steam locomotives in the UK and around the world heralded the start of [Railway 200](#). And the Royal Mint has struck a £2 coin to commemorate the 200th anniversary of the opening of the Stockton and Darlington Railway. Rf wants to be seen to be involved in the celebration, so do let us know about any events that you are planning.

Roger Smith

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

Friends of the Far North Line

Having celebrated the 150th anniversary of the Far North Line in 2024, FoFNL is now looking forward to Railway 200. Its AGM & Conference this year will be held on 4 July in Wick, almost the very north of the British railway system.

South East Northumberland Rail User Group

The long-awaited [ECML timetable](#) from December 2025 aims to improve connectivity between London, Yorkshire, the North East and Scotland, and between the Scottish Borders and Northumberland. Additional services could generate £60m/year more to further enhance the line.

However, SENRUG Chair Dennis Fancett said: "Overall this timetable remains bad for our region. Whilst we would support the objective of providing more train capacity between London and Edinburgh, this should not be achieved by reducing services in Northumberland".

The additional TPE services between Newcastle and Edinburgh, and a later weekday return from Edinburgh back to Northumberland stations are welcome, but Morpeth loses 2 LNER services southbound and 3 northbound, including the heavily used direct morning service to Aberdeen. Northern's Morpeth - MetroCentre - Hexham service is severed, and Alnmouth loses the vital 0810 service to Newcastle, used by commuters and those going to college.

"None of the above can be justified by cutting 10 minutes off a London to Edinburgh journey. We request that even at this late stage tweaks can be made which address the issues we have consistently raised, and deliver a fair deal to Northumberland passengers and businesses."

Lakes Line Rail User Group

Encouragingly, in FY23-24 the number of Lakes Line passengers rose 12.6% at Oxenholme and 14.8% at Windermere, but 31% at Burneside - although the latter figure could simply reflect Northern working harder to ensure every passenger buys a ticket. The ORR spreadsheet also records the number of each type of ticket sold. Intriguingly, both Oxenholme and Windermere are shown as having no users travelling on a full price ticket.

On Saturday 30 November, no fewer than 15 services at Oxenholme were cancelled, and 24 on the Sunday, many due to a lack of staff. At the AGM, Gail Torrance, Head of Trains and Stations in Northern's West and Central Region described its performance in her area as 'challenging'. Optima, a sickness management company, had been engaged to help get more staff back to work, but first results have been disappointing.

Another reason for the unreliable service has been the lack of a Rest Day Working Agreement with drivers. But while ASLEF had now agreed to one, negotiations for Sunday working with the RMT, which represents train conductors, had not yet reached a satisfactory conclusion. She also said that the process to procure new trains was now under way, but the first of these were not due until 2030. It was too early to say whether they would be diesel, electric or bi-mode, but they will be fitted for working under the European Train Control System.

Skipton-East Lancashire Rail Action Partnership

SELRAP congratulates the campaigners and the local authority on achieving the reopening of the Northumberland Line to passengers after 60 years; East Lancashire and beyond would benefit equally from reopening the Skipton - Colne line. With fast passenger trains into Leeds every half hour yielding a BCR of 1.27, the project has a very sound business case. The Airedale line is growing, and the Drax power station at Selby needs resilient freight transport across the Pennines. However, the project will require a capital investment of £300m, and then a lengthy DCO process.

Support The Oldham Rochdale Manchester lines

Storm has a very good relationship with all the 'players' in the local rail industry, which gives it access to decision makers, who recognise that its ideas are soundly based. Recent examples include changing the display on the new screens at Rochdale, running an extra train from Littleborough and Smithy Bridge on Saturdays, and adding extra coaches to some trains to compensate for the reductions in the autumn timetable. Storm is also working to shorten the closure of the Oldham Loop line on Metrolink for up to three years for construction work, during which time the Castleton line stopping trains should continue to Todmorden.

Friends of the Barton Line

On 15 November, FBL attended the unveiling of a plaque to Sir Edward Watkin at Cleethorpes station; by siting this on the seafront, he enabled visitors to be on the beach within minutes. NR then opened Platform 4, which cost £1m to reinstate, and came into operation on 25 November.

EMR's performance has been good, although an increase in cancellations needs to be discussed. £60m will be spent on refurbishing its carriages. TPE's performance was much improved, with more 6-car Class 185 units being deployed.

At the AGM, it was suggested that FBL apply for membership of the CRN (not just open to CRPs), as while the Barton Cleethorpes CRP had provided several grants to FBL in the past, it would soon be unable to; by joining the CRN, FBL could apply for grants of up to £1,000. The FBL Committee voted 5 - 4 against, as it wanted to keep their respective roles distinct.

An Assisted Changing Places toilet was likely to be installed at Cleethorpes; Barton, Habrough, Thornton Abbey and Ulceby stations were rated "good".

British Regional Transport Association

Northampton and Leicester are only 33 miles apart but the journey currently takes over 100mins by train, with two changes, and 90mins by bus. However, a 2020 NR report found that the Northampton to Market Harborough Railway (N2MH), which closed in the 1980s, could be fully re-opened with a journey time of just 34mins, including three stops. Annoyingly, the forecast usage was redacted; complete and updated, the report would enable a fully informed decision.

Bedford Commuters Association

Cancellations due to a lack of staff in the early evening, when the Thameslink service to Bedford is reduced to two fast trains and two stopping trains per hour, has led to gaps of up to two hours. There has been some improvement, but BCA will continue to monitor the situation, and meet with GTR again for an update on what it is doing to resolve the issue.

Starting the East West Rail Bedford service in 2030 with just 1tph to Oxford (plus the current Bletchley service) lacks ambition. At Bedford station, the plan to create dedicated EWR tracks and platforms by demolishing houses to the north is sub-optimum; it is not being proposed in Oxford, Milton Keynes or Cambridge. There is no mention of a Bedford - Milton Keynes service, a principal traffic flow in the region, even in Connection Stage 3 when there is a frequent service to Bletchley. BCA will respond to the latest consultation accordingly.

Tunbridge Wells & District Rail Travellers' Association

Highlights from the November Public Transport Forum were, from NR:

- Gatwick service – hourly from Tonbridge is the preferred option, but unlikely at present
- High Brooms accessibility – planned for the five-year Control Period that started in April. The design is complete, but the DfT has yet to approve funding for construction
- Hastings line – a new Mobile Response Manager based at Robertsbridge should improve incident/accident response times (previously had to wait for someone to attend from Ashford or Hastings)
- Tonbridge station - will form part of a strategic review taking in retail, bus connectivity, accessibility and housing development.

And from South Eastern:

- Four days in October and November saw the most passengers travelling to and from London in one day since March 2020, but the level of commuting remains static. Off peak travel at the weekend remains very strong
- Punctuality: 85.3% overall in last period against a target of 90%, but only 78.3% for the Hastings line.
- Reliability: very strong, with only 2.3% of services cancelled.

The Association will wind up next March due to declining membership; many commuters now travel only two or three days per week, so this is no longer a hot topic. It is in discussion with the Tonbridge group (TLC); James Read at Tunbridge Wells Borough Council will update the forum.

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

According to Rf President Christian Wolmar, circumstances vary on every part of the railway, and that applies equally to campaigning; what is appropriate in one place may not work in another.

Flexibility and maybe compromise are key. To persuade Government ministers that what appears to be a lost cause could actually be a very worthwhile project, a new way of assessing transport schemes is required, moving away from business cases based on spurious BCR assessments.

RAILFUTURE YORKSHIRE

Bradford Forster Square is being made ready for more 10-coach LNER trains. Currently, only one platform can take the Azumas, so Platform 4 is being extended. The new track is already in place. With RYR cancelled, two South Yorkshire rail projects are at best on hold: Sheffield - Chesterfield via the Barrow Hill line, and Sheffield - Stocksbridge. However, plans for a new station at Waverley between Sheffield and Worksop are progressing thanks to the Sustainable Transport Fund. The multi-million pound investment in the Penistone Line secured by Kirklees Council has also escaped the cull, although the funding may not be enough to deliver all the promised benefits.

The Harrogate - York line could also be seen as a success story, with Class 170s replacing Pacers and 150s, and the service doubled to half-hourly following a £12.5m signalling and track project. Prospects are further improved by population growth at Harrogate and Knaresborough, and a proposed new town at Cattal, while future electrification could enable a Bradford Forster Square service via a new Airport station. However, work planned for the New Year on a third track north of York to resolve conflicts at Skelton Junction is not happening.

RAILFUTURE EAST MIDLANDS

Sir Peter Soulsby, Chair of Transport for the East Midlands, has been reminded that the proposed [Hinckley National Rail Freight Interchange](#) could help fund a Coventry - Leicester link at Nuneaton to enable access from the south. In September, the Government said it was "Minded to Refuse" the Interchange, but put back a final decision until March.

RAILFUTURE WEST MIDLANDS

Rf is always on the look out for new towns around rail stations or links. Deputy Prime Minister Angela Rayner has authorised one around Worcester Parkway, where the North Cotswold line to Oxford and Paddington crosses the Bristol - Birmingham line.

Another new station could support housing development at Fradley on the Lichfield - Burton line, which is currently used by freight trains and for diversions. It also passes the National Memorial Arboretum, so a station at Alrewas would have a national benefit. Reinstated, the bay platforms at Burton would cater for services to both Lichfield and Leicester.

RAILFUTURE LONDON AND THE SOUTH EAST

New rail links to Heathrow airport from the [west](#) and from the [south](#) would benefit its staff as much as the growing passenger volumes. Both schemes would need private finance, so Rf stands ready to engage with all parties. Meanwhile, Gatwick airport could gain another rail catchment area with no need for any new infrastructure. With Rf stakeholder input, NR has assessed that a Tonbridge service, additional to a peak Redhill shuttle, was both feasible and viable.

RfL&SE hopes to see Old Oak Common evolve into a Stratford-style transport hub. TfL's proposed [West London Orbital](#) Overground line would link HS2, GWR and Elizabeth Line services south to Kew Bridge and Hounslow, and north to Hendon and West Hampstead Thameslink.

RAILFUTURE WESSEX

SWR could retrofit Class 450 units with batteries for use on the Exeter line west of Basingstoke. Electrifying some sections to top them up would need the embargo on extending third-rail lifted, but the route has many south-facing embankments ideal for installing solar panels.

CAMPAIGN FOR BETTER TRANSPORT

CBT is proud to play its part in Railway 200. But the celebration isn't just about looking back; it's about looking to the future and dreaming big. At its heart is a simple but powerful idea that rail has the potential to do even more for us all. With a number of existential threats facing us, it remains a key part of the solution.

Improving transport is all about getting people where they need to go. Wherever they live, no one should be lonely or miss out on opportunities for lack of public transport, but it has to be greener. Reform of the railways focused on the needs of passengers is ongoing. CBT is especially gratified with best-price train tickets that will guarantee people get the best deal. Giving local mayors more responsibility for rail has worked well in London and Liverpool, and 'tap in, tap-out' ticketing is being more widely introduced.

COMMUNITY RAIL NETWORK

CBT will shortly publish its response to the Government's 'call for ideas' for its Integrated National Transport Strategy, and consult with DfT on how local engagement can support its development. CBT members are encouraged to respond to the call, especially if they have case studies or project reports showing how to achieve people-focused, inclusive, integrated transport, and overcome barriers to progress.

TRANSPORT FOCUS

Train cancellations are around 4% nationally, almost double the level 15 years ago. There are no quick fixes, but everything possible must be done to deliver better customer service, starting with realistically timed services, better communication during disruption, and improved passenger assistance. So as well as cancellations and punctuality, [train performance](#) assessments from April 2026 should cover softer elements such as passenger satisfaction and getting a seat.

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

Passengers have from 23-29 January to claim up to 50% off selected Advance and Off-Peak tickets available for rail journeys taken between 30 January and 15 March.

The 25,000-volt overhead power lines between Wigan and Bolton are now permanently live. And electricity will arc; you don't have to touch the wire to come to harm.

Since North Northants Council almost tripled its charges to park at Corby station, parking in local streets has become chaotic. Land nearby earmarked for development could be an alternative. Currently, just one bus an hour on one route calls at the station, so that is not an attractive option. But if drivers choose to go elsewhere, the EMR Connect service to St Pancras via Bedford and Luton Airport could be in jeopardy.

In its Final Determination of a five-year spending plan, ORR has directed HS1 Ltd to lower its charges from April 2025 for passenger and freight operators to use the high-speed line from London to the Channel Tunnel.

According to Active Thinking, St Pancras International could increase its 1,800 passengers/hour to 2,400 within the next four years, while Eurotunnel aims to double its throughput by 2034. Evolyn plans to launch a rival service to Paris, and both Deutsche Bahn and Richard Branson are said to be interested in rail links to mainland Europe.

The upgraded Solent Rail Terminal in Southampton handled over 55,000 containers in six months. Dubai Ports World will also challenge Felixstowe with a dedicated rail freight terminal serving two new berths on the Thames estuary capable of handling ships carrying around 10,000 containers.

...and finally

Avanti West Coast train services between Liverpool and London were cancelled for several hours after ASLEF told its drivers at the Edge Hill depot in Liverpool not to walk on about two inches of snow. The union said it was "basic safety stuff". Avanti declined to comment.

The East Anglian Railway Museum at Wakes Colne near Colchester will home a BR Class 309 EMU, aka the Clacton Express, which ran on the Great Eastern Main Line from Liverpool Street to Colchester, Clacton and Walton-on-the-Naze. Built in York in 1962, it was a pioneer of its time, one of the first of its type in the world to run at 100mph.

CONSULTATIONS

- Brighton & Hove City Council: [City Plan 2041](#), closes 20 January.
- East West Rail: [Non-statutory consultation](#), closes 24 January.
- Wiltshire Council: [Local Transport Plan 4 \(LTP4\) 2025-39](#), closes 24 January.
- North East Mayor: [Local Transport Plan for NE Combined Authority](#), closes 26 January.
- DfT: [Integrated National Transport Strategy for England Call for Ideas](#), closes 30 January.
- Western Gateway STB [Strategic Investment Plan](#) consultation, closes 2 February.
- Exeter City Council: [Exeter Plan](#), closes 6 February.
- Lewes District Council: [Local Plan – Lewes 2040](#), closes 28 February.
- Transport for the South East: [Transport Strategy](#), closes 7 March.

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.

January

- Tuesday 21. Rf London & South East, Herts & Beds division, **Online**, 1930 (Also 1 March in London, and 9 April Online).
- Wednesday 22. Rf Yorkshire, **Online**, 1000 (Also 29 March in York at 1300, and 10 May (AGM)).
- Tuesday 28. CRN AGM, **Online**, 1400.
- Tuesday 28. Levenmouth Rail Campaign, Fife Renewables Innovation Centre, Ajax Way, **Methil**, Leven, KY8 3RS (TBC) and **Online**, 1830. (Also the last Tuesday of alternate months).

February

- Thursday 6. Rf London & South East, Sussex & Coastway division **Online**, 1800.
- Saturday 8. Rf North West AGM, Holiday Inn, 85 Talbot Road, **Blackpool** FY1 1LL, 1200.
- Tuesday 11. Support The Oldham Rochdale Manchester Rail Lines Group, The Blue Pits Inn, 842 Manchester Road, Castleton, **Rochdale**, OL11 2SP, 1400.
- Tuesday 11. Chesham & District Transport Users' Group, Chesham Town Hall, Parsonage Lane, **Chesham**, Bucks, HP5 1EP, 1930 (Also 1 April and 13 May).
- Saturday 15. Rf London & South East, Kent Division, **Online**, 1400.
- Saturday 22. Rf East Anglia, Friends Meeting House, St John's Street, **Bury St Edmunds**, IP33 1SJ (Also 24 April in Peterborough Museum (joint meeting) and 21 June in Ipswich).

Further Ahead

- 1 March. East Suffolk Travel Association, Methodist Church, **Woodbridge** (Also 10 May (AGM)).

- 10 March. Ribble Valley Rail, New Inn, Parson Lane, **Clitheroe**, Lancs, BB7 2JN, 1900 (Also 12 May).
- 12 March. Rf London & South East, Eastern division, **Online**, 1900 (Also 14 May).
- 13 March. Community Rail Awards, Civic Centre, **Newcastle**.
- 15 March. Rf Lincolnshire branch AGM.
- 19 March. Friends of the Barton Line, White Swan, **Barton** interchange, 1800 (Also 15 May at the No1 Inn, Cleethorpes at 1900)
- 20 March. Rf London & South East, London Metro division, 75 Cowcross Street, **Farringdon**, 1900 (Also 15 May).

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

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