

# RAIL USER EXPRESS



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Campaigning for a bigger better railway

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January 2026

## Welcome to the Rail User Express

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A Happy New Year to all my readers; but less so for the railways with only the Camp Hill line due to reopen shortly, CKP Railways that sought to reopen the Cockermouth, Keswick and Penrith line having folded following the sad death of Cedric Martindale, no progress on Ely North Junction and those that have been announced – Portishead, Cowley, East West Rail to Cambridge, and Northern Powerhouse Rail - years away. We have to make the best use of what we have, but even that is difficult with the shortage of rolling stock, especially in the north. The Brighton main line through Gatwick is sub-optimal, and there are still no passenger services from Oxford to Milton Keynes.

Roger Smith

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

### Friends of the Far North Line

Green MSP Ariane Burgess told the Scottish Government that dualling and electrifying the Highland Main Line “could cut journey times, improve reliability, and reduce emissions. It would be a game-changer for our Highland communities”. FoFNL convener Ian Budd said it would “bring great benefit to the FNL for passengers, and for transferring freight to the railway”.

### Friends of the Settle – Carlisle Line

The Settle Carlisle Railway Development Company has been recognised by Tripadvisor® in its Travelers’ Choice® Awards for 2025, placing it among the top 10% of listings around the world.

Heidelberg Materials has celebrated the reopening of the rail link to its Horton quarry in the Yorkshire Dales National Park, and 150 years of rail freight on the Settle - Carlisle line. The quarry has been producing limestone and high quality gritstone since 1889. Its original rail siding was removed in 1965, but the new terminal is once again allowing aggregate to be delivered to construction projects across the North West by rail.

### Lakes Line Rail User Group

On Monday 3 November 2025, the 0428 from Glasgow to London hit a land slip near Shap Summit and derailed. LLRUG commends the NR repair teams who worked in appalling weather to remove the train and repair the overhead wires overnight. Track, signalling and other repairs were completed by Tuesday evening, and Wednesday morning saw a normal passenger service.

However, it is less impressed by Avanti saying there were no trains north of Preston when Northern ran normally throughout from Preston to Lancaster, Barrow and Oxenholme, and TransPennine ran an Oxenholme to Manchester Airport shuttle on the Tuesday.

LLRUG is happy to clarify the reference in its September newsletter to Avanti West Coast's poor performance. Delays were also due to issues such as signalling, track, overhead wires, trespass, and other passenger and freight train operators, reducing those solely attributable to Avanti. However, its significant performance problems of punctuality and cancellations north of Preston continued throughout the Autumn with no discernible improvement.

### **Northern Weekly Salvo – Paul Salveson**

Following severe weather warnings on 14 /15 December, no Northern services ran anywhere in Cumbria. However, Avanti and TransPennine Express ran services from Preston to Glasgow via Oxenholme and Shap, so why not on the Settle & Carlisle or Cumbrian Coast lines or the Windermere branch? Selective speed restrictions combined with checks on locations known for problems would have been a more sensible response.

The establishment of GBR should be an opportunity for some creative thinking about how a state-owned rail operator should work. A Furness and Lakes Railway serving the regional lines north of Lancaster to Barrow, Windermere and round the coast to Whitehaven, Workington and Carlisle could be a test bed for a unified regional operation: big enough to work in operational terms, but small enough to be close to a large market for both tourists and local people.

### **Friends of the Barton Line**

Letters to two local MPs and the Mayor of Greater Lincolnshire regarding cancellation rates on the Barton Line, failed trains and the lack of maintenance facilities, public information services and confidence in the service, together with its potential as driver for growth in the communities and some constructive (albeit unlikely) solutions drew the following response from Melanie Onn MP: "Thank you for the comprehensive letter you sent me on the unacceptable cancellations on the line over recent months and for the details of the case as well as suggestions for improvement. I will be taking up this case with Ministers, the ORR and EMR".

### **Harborough Rail Users**

HRU welcomes the reinstatement by East Midlands Railway of a weekday 2335 service from London St Pancras to Market Harborough following its campaigning and that of Neil O'Brien MP, who said the previous last train an hour earlier meant travellers were unable to enjoy a night out in the capital. It gets to Market Harborough at 0117, but every six weeks or so will be replaced by a bus service from Kettering for scheduled engineering work.

### **British Regional Transport Association**

BRTA has identified Dumfries and Galloway as needing more rail presence. The South West of Scotland Transport Partnership has made a funding application for a feasibility study into reopening the Dumfries - Stranraer line. It would cross the area much faster than will ever be possible by road. A link to the Borders Railway by reinstating the dismantled north - east chord at Mossband Junction, and with the existing line between Gretna Junction and Dumfries would create a direct Edinburgh - Borders - Galloway - Stranraer/Cairnryan rail route. The two ferry ports could then be linked by reusing the mostly intact and largely unobstructed trackbed of the former WWII military railway.

### **Bedford Commuters Association**

The construction of a new footbridge and lifts at Flitwick Station is due to start early in FY 26/27, with completion targeted for Spring 2027. Details on the new Wixams station are awaited. The first refurbished EMR Class 360 is due to enter service in the early Spring of 2026.

## Bedwyn Trains Passenger Group

Further to the booking tip last month, Trevor Jones from Guildford notes that: "You can also use the "Future Travel" option on a ticket machine to buy an off-peak ticket just before the off-peak start time for use on a train shortly after - particularly useful at a ticket machine on the opposite side of a big station like Guildford, when you don't have time to traipse over the footbridge to use the booking office".

## 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

Roger Blake announced at the 2024 AGM that the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary RUG Awards would be his last. If anyone else wishes to take them over, please let him know.

Contactless payment for rail travel using tap and go with a bank card or mobile device is now available at 20 more stations in the London area. At the end of the day, the system works out the cheapest fare you could have paid, applies any relevant cap, and charges your card. Rf Vice Chair Neil Middleton [commented](#): contactless payment is convenient and simple – but may not offer the lowest price because it still doesn't support railcards, and also validity times for fares can vary.

## RAILFUTURE YORKSHIRE

Following a Minsters Rail Campaign and East Riding of Yorkshire Council Restoring Your Railway bid to reinstate the Beverley - York line, a Strategic Outline Case was sent to the DfT in 2022. AECOM found that it would bring substantial social and economic benefits, and support sustainable economic growth and new development. Heavy rail would most strongly deliver competitive journey times and enhanced connectivity; new alignments were identified for any new build. It would also provide an alternative to the existing main line to Hull along the Humber, with its high risk of flooding. The Campaign is optimistic that funding can be found for its next objective, an Outline Business Case.

In November, Alex Hornby, Operations and Customer Director, said Northern aimed to increase passenger numbers 30% by 2030. Rf fully supports this bold plan, but it will need additional rolling stock very soon. There may be enough second-hand electric trains to strengthen its electric fleet, provided HM Treasury allows this, but its new non-electrified trains are not due until 2031, so it will need the 27 Class 158 units that should become available from Transport for Wales in 2027 - but other TOCs will also want them. To cater for its immediate need, the Government should release funding for more Class 195 units: ideally 3 and 4-car sets, but at least extra trailer carriages to strengthen some 2- and 3-car units into 3 and 4.

The November branch meeting was told that SLC Consulting's Penistone Line Strategy depended on rolling stock availability. The line needed 195s with their better acceleration to enable faster services, and also infrastructure improvements. The connection times between the Penistone Line and Bradford services at Huddersfield were completely unacceptable for the Leeds - Sheffield corridor; the Mayors of South and West Yorkshire advocated 4 fast services per hour. There was also discussion as to whether the Dearne Valley needed a new parkway station.

## RAILFUTURE HERTS & BEDS

Despite the Government's freeze on rail fares, TfL is raising those on the Underground, Overground and Elizabeth Line by an inflation-busting 5.8% from March.

TfL sent Rf a detailed [response](#) regarding its proposed adoption of Great Northern's Inner services from Moorgate to Welwyn Garden City, and to Stevenage via Hertford North. A redacted version of the [business case](#) is also in the public domain.

## RAILFUTURE WESSEX

Rf Wessex hopes that when every TOC in the south is operating under the GBR brand, some of the direct links that were lost with privatisation could be restored: Brighton - Southampton trains extended to Bournemouth; Waterloo – Salisbury to Bristol, and some Reading - Basingstoke shuttles to Salisbury. There must be many other examples around Britain, where direct connections could be restored once the accurate division of fares income is no longer an issue.

## COMMUNITY RAIL NETWORK

2026 promises to be a busy and exciting year for CRN: rail reform remains high on the agenda. Later this month, the National Community Rail Steering Group will discuss the core recommendations submitted to the DfT and its operator on how community rail is empowered into the future. CRN also seeks to develop impact and resilience in its members, and has [shortlisted](#) the entries for the 2026 Community Rail Awards.

## CAMPAIGN FOR BETTER TRANSPORT

The National Railway Museum has catalogued and digitised CBT's archival materials for the nation. From beautifully hand-stitched bunting bearing campaign messages to records of its rail reform campaign in the 1990s, the items in the 50-year archive will surprise and delight.

Buses connect us to the people we love, the things we need and the places that matter. But in many places, they aren't working; bus stops are poorly maintained and lack even basic information. CBT is working with the Government, bus companies and local councils to make bus stops better and ensure that every community has a reliable service.

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



The new GBR red, white and blue livery and branding mirrors the Union Flag and will appear on trains, at stations and on its website and app.

ORR's annual health and safety report and Cost of Benefits and Safety recommendations helped the industry make more cost-effective safety decisions, strengthened accountability, improved consumer outcomes, and supported investment in Britain's future transport infrastructure. It also ordered HS1 Ltd to reduce charges for train operators in the next Control Period.

ORR CEO John Larkinson is to stand down from his executive roles at the end of April 2026. He feels that the introduction of the Railways Bill into Parliament is an appropriate time to depart.

From 17-25 January, work will start on installing overhead lines between Haymarket and Dalmeny. The £342m Scottish Government programme to electrify routes in Fife and the Borders will enable battery/electric trains to make services more reliable and sustainable. However, following the completion of this and the East Kilbride projects, no more electrification work is in the pipeline.

Eight train service managers from cross-border operators LNER, Avanti West Coast, CrossCountry and TransPennine Express have joined Scotland's Rail Operating Centre to help those from NR, ScotRail, Caledonian Sleeper and the British Transport Police manage any disruption.

HS2 is earning over £14m a year by renting out homes it purchased along cancelled and curtailed parts of the route. All but one of the 122 residential properties between Birmingham and Crewe are currently occupied by tenants.

VolkerRail, Laing O'Rourke, Atkins Realis and Siemens Mobility have formed the Midlands Rail Hub Alliance to design and develop the project, which would cost around £1.75bn if completed in full. Two new chords at Bordesley will connect the Chiltern Main Line with the Camp Hill line that runs through Birmingham from the South West towards the East Midlands.

Five new West Midlands stations: Kings Heath, Moseley and Pineapple Road on the Camp Hill line, and Willenhall and Darlaston in Walsall, are ready to open. It will see the return of passenger services on the Camp Hill line after 80 years, and end a 60-year wait for services at Willenhall and Darlaston.

In Railwatch, Tony Millinger calls for maximum use of the two major stations that will serve Birmingham Airport, as projected travel times from its [Interchange station](#) to London are 15mins shorter than from Stansted – but do resist the temptation to call it London Birmingham Airport!

In FY 24/25, rail bridges were struck 1,666 times causing over 30,000 hours of delays that cost the industry around £12m. Watling Street A5 in Hinckley was hit 22 times, Harlaxton Road in Grantham 18 times, and Stuntney Road in Ely 15 times. Risk-management specialists BES Group and NR are to trial a remote monitoring system at Harlaxton Road bridge, which carries the ECML over a six-road junction. Cameras and impact-sensing technology will allow remote assessment within seconds, reducing disruption for passengers, and saving staff from having to access the track to inspect the structure.

An £8.3m mile-long cycle lane from Corby town centre to the railway station will provide a safe, well-lit route for both commuters and Tresham College students.

West Northamptonshire Council's latest draft Local Plan proposes to restore two former rail lines in Northampton: the Market Harborough line, and the disused Brackmills line that once formed part of the line to Bedford.

Following its You Said, We Did report in November, EWR is planning Design Update Sessions to brief the communities concerned on changes to its proposals since it last spoke to them.

The Government has granted Universal Studios planning permission for a theme park on what was once Stewartby brickworks, near Bedford. It will have excellent road and rail connections including East West Rail (EWR) and Thameslink/Midland Main Line, and not be far from Luton Airport.

### *...and finally*

Steve Higgs met his bride-to-be in November 2024 when he offered her his seat on the 2309 London Northwestern Railway service from Euston towards Milton Keynes, and they got chatting. A year later they got engaged on the same service. The conductor made a special announcement hinting at the forthcoming proposal, which gave Mr Higgs the cue to get down on one knee.

Over £4,500 has been raised for a memorial to honour Nala, a six-year-old ginger cat who made the ticket gate at Stevenage station her second home. Natasha Ambler, her owner, said she had "lost a member of the family".

## CONSULTATIONS

- East Midlands Combined Authority: [Mayor's Transport Plan to 2040](#), closes 8 February.
- Luton Council: [Local Transport Plan 5](#), closes 19 February.
- Lewes District Council: [Local Plan, phase 2 - Spatial Strategy for Development \(incorporating Site Allocations\)](#), closes 28 February.
- Ministry of Housing and Local Government: [National Planning Policy Framework](#), closes 10 March.

Please advise [Roger Blake](#) of any other consultations.

## 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 events
- Local Group events.

### January

■ Thursday 22. Rf London & South East, Metro & Eastern division, Alan Baxter Gallery, 75 Cowcross St, **London**, EC1M 6EL, 1900 (Also 12 March).

### February

- Tuesday 10. Support The Oldham Rochdale Manchester rail lines group, The Blue Pits Inn, 842 Manchester Road, **Castleton**, Rochdale, OL11 2SP, 1400.
- Tuesday 10. Rf London & South East, Herts & Beds division, **Online**, 1930 (Also 7 March in St Albans, 1100).
- Wednesday 11. Rf West Midlands, Moor Street station, **Birmingham**, 1745 (Also 11 March, 8 April and 13 May).
- Wednesday 11. Friends of the Barton Line, No 1 Inn, **Cleethorpes** station, 1900 (Also 8 April in Barton, and 10 June (AGM) in Cleethorpes).
- Thursday 12. Rf London & South East, Sussex & Coastway division, **Online**, 1800.
- Tuesday 17. Chesham & District Transport Users' Group, Town Hall, Parsonage Lane, **Chesham**, Bucks, HP5 1EP, 1930.
- Saturday 21. Rf London & South East, Kent division, 1400.
- Saturday 28. Rf East Anglia, Friends Meeting House, St. John's Street, **Bury St. Edmunds**, Suffolk, IP33 1SJ.

### Further Ahead

- 9 March. Ribble Valley Rail, New Inn, Parson Lane, **Clitheroe**, Lancs, BB7 2JN, 1900 (Also 11 May).

- 14 March. Rf Yorkshire AGM, Mill Hill Chapel, City Square, **Leeds**, LS1 5EB, 1300.
- 19 March. Community Rail Awards, Pride Park, **Derby**, DE24 8JB.
- 28 March. Lakes Line Rail User Group AGM, Stonecross Manor Hotel, **Kendal**, 1400.
- 18 April. Rf London and South East Branch AGM, Wesley's Chapel, 49 City Road, **London EC1**.
- 5-6 June. European Passengers' Federation, Gouvernement aan de Maas, **Maastricht**, Holland.
- 4 July. Rf AGM, Quaker Meeting House, 40 Bull Street, **Birmingham**, B4 6AF.

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

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