



February 2024

Welcome to the Rail User Express

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The latest (2022/23) RSSB Annual Health and Safety Report for Britain's railways shows that the train is still one of the safest forms of transport, the car being 26 times as risky, the bicycle over 400 times and motorcycle over 1,500 times. Yet the road lobby continues to prevail when it comes to Government spending.

Roger Smith

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

Friends of the Far North Line

Plans to electrify most rail services and eliminate the most polluting traction are enshrined in Scottish law, but its ability to do much about it is in severe doubt. The latest budget shows an £80m cut in rail spending alongside a £230m increase for roads. Network Rail (NR) has scrapped plans for a bridge to replace the level crossing at Delny, north of Invergordon, as the cost has soared to nearly £13m. FoFNL now hopes for an upgrade instead to allow a higher line speed.

Both the Highland Main Line and the FNL need more double track or passing loops to increase their capacity and improve the flow of traffic. The early morning business train from Inverness to Edinburgh leaves 12 minutes earlier than it used to and gets in 17 minutes later, while the 1234 from Wick to Inverness now takes 4hrs 34mins; in 2000 the same journey took 3hrs 48mins.

Friends of the West Highland Lines

By the end of summer, eight WHL stations - Helensburgh Upper, Ardlui, Roy Bridge, Garelochhead, Arrochar and Tarbet, Crianlarich, Bridge of Orchy and Tulloch - will benefit from £1.7m of Scottish Government funding to extend their platforms. Longer trains with more space will help travellers enjoy the West Highland Way, the wilderness of Rannoch Moor and the iconic Glenfinnan viaduct.

[Benighted on the Moor](#) is an audio drama that tells the true tale of seven Victorian men who in January 1889 made an intrepid, not to say foolhardy, attempt to map a route for the WHL across Rannoch Moor. The coming of the railway marked a cultural watershed, as it brought outside influences both good and bad to the remote Gaelic speaking community. The play is also available as a series of geolocated audio walks from Corroul, Rannoch and Bridge of Orchy stations.

Levenmouth Rail Campaign

Next month sees the tenth anniversary of LMRC. The fruits of their labour are about to be realised. An interim service to Edinburgh is set to start, probably in June, either half-hourly via Dunfermline in 75mins, or hourly via Kirkcaldy in 64mins, and with better connections to the north. A full timetable with services on both routes is due to start next year.

South East Northumberland Rail User Group

The Northumberland Line will open in stages. Ashington – Newsham – Seaton Delaval - Newcastle should open this summer, followed reasonably soon after by Bedlington and Bebside, and then by Northumberland Park. SENRUG Chair Dennis Fancett commented: “Whilst we are naturally disappointed some stations won’t come on stream initially, we support the plan to get the Ashington – Newcastle service going as soon as possible. It would be pointless to hold this back until the full scheme is ready.”

SENRUG is dismayed that the ECML timetable proposed for December 2024 will reduce train services along the Northumberland coast. Dennis Fancett explained: “whilst we haven’t been given details of the new timetable, we’ve been told that as far as Morpeth and Alnmouth are concerned, there are no substantive changes to the proposals put forward in 2021, which were roundly condemned by local stakeholders including politicians of all parties.”

“Rather than investing in our rail infrastructure here in Northumberland to allow even more trains to run, we understand that NR is actually cutting back on some planned infrastructure investments such as power supply upgrades, which makes it more difficult to run more electric trains or add more coaches to the ones already running. It will also make it harder to introduce the hourly all-station local service between Newcastle and Berwick, desperately needed for communities such as Widdrington and Chathill.”

Support The Oldham Rochdale Manchester lines

Richard Lysons had a very positive meeting with Alan Johnson, manager of the Stakehill Business Improvement District in regards to a station at Slattocks; he is very pro-rail, and supportive of STORM's campaign. Richard gave him a copy of Rf's book Britain's Growing Railway, and the joint Rf/DfT/CBT document [Expanding The Railways: How to develop and deliver a proposal](#).

Northern hopes to replace Dalesrail with a Rochdale - Ribbleshead service on summer Saturdays using Class 150s. It has retired its Class 319 EMUs, but gained some Class 323s from West Midlands to operate on the electric lines around Manchester.

Friends of the Barton Line Rail User Group

The Barton Heritage Project will mark the 175th anniversary of the opening of the Barton branch with a ribbon cutting ceremony by the Mayor at Barton station from 1145 on 1 March, followed by a light finger buffet (by invitation only) at the White Swan and the cutting of a celebratory cake. A permanent and some temporary posters are being prepared, bunting will be erected, and the Civic Society plaque cleaned. On 2 March, it is intended to distribute goody bags and chocolates for passengers and crew on the 0950 train from Barton to Cleethorpes and back.

Bedwyn Trains Passenger Group

With the new weekday morning departure from Paddington serving Kintbury, Hungerford and Bedwyn, BTPG asked for a return evening service, to enable a day out in the West Country. GWR has responded positively: from June, the 1904 from Paignton will call at Bedwyn at around 2130 instead of at Hungerford. The 2116 shuttle from Bedwyn is then put back to about 2136 to give passengers for Hungerford and Kintbury a connection without changing platforms. Thus the 1904 will serve all three stations instead of just the one.

Avocet Line Rail Users Group

As ALRUG requested some two years ago, GWR has extended the half-hourly service into Saturday evenings, with new Exmouth departures at 2024 and 2126 to Paignton, and 2225 to St Davids. This leaves Sunday, which is now the busiest day of the week, as the only one with just an hourly early evening service. GWR would like to run more trains, but historic working practices make this difficult to achieve. However, ALRUG is confident it will find a way.

Project Churchward aims to renew GWR's regional network fleet by 2028. Trials of fast-charging battery trains are ongoing on the Greenford branch, and this service could start later this year. However, GWR will review all possible options to give the DfT a choice. Tony Jackson for ALRUG notes that the Class 175 DMUs shed by TfW are currently idle. Taking the 2-car units for use in Cornwall would release Class 150s for deployment in Exeter - where they go to be serviced - and this in turn would free additional Turbos for services in the Bristol area.

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](#).



RUG Awards 2024 - call for nominations expires Easter Saturday, 30 March (NB the earlier date!)

The 2024 RUG Awards and Commendations (also open to local campaigns, station adopters and rail partnerships etc) will be presented at the Rf national AGM at the Holyrood Hotel in Edinburgh on Saturday 13 July. Nominations must be submitted by Easter Saturday; details of how to enter are on [Rf's website](#). Four of the six awards open for nominations have been named in honour of past members and their dedication to the cause of rail development:

- The Adrian Shooter award for best website
- The Clara Zilahi award for best campaigner
- The Oliver Lovell award for best new group
- The Paul Abell award for best newsletter

Nominations are also invited for best social media and best campaign. The Judges' Special Award is made at the sole discretion of the panel of Rf Vice-Presidents who will judge the entries. Following presentation of the Awards and Commendations, the winners will be invited to tell their story, which often attracts publicity in the media – yet another good reason to get your entry in.

NEWS

The Rf Board met on 9 December to approve the budget for 2024, and set the date for the AGM (see above). The key policy and campaign issues for 2024 are:

- A realistic growth strategy to get rail out of its financial hole. [Reliability](#) is the key factor
- Station operation – building on the campaign against ticket office closures
- Fares reform – must be understandable and affordable
- Industrial relations – rail leaders need to be empowered and given clear objectives
- Rail reform – engage with the shadow transport team (see below)
- Network North – [options for HS2](#) must be kept open.

On 10 January, Rf presented the shadow Rail Minister, Steven Morgan, with a [10-point action plan](#), which was well received. Labour plans to bring the railways into public ownership by letting existing passenger train operator contracts run out – there appears to be no intention to extend nationalisation any further. Steven’s offer of a piece for Railwatch on Labour’s plan for the railways was accepted, so Rf will ask the other parties if they would also like to contribute one.

COMMUNITY RAIL NETWORK

CRN plans for 2024-25 include working with Scenic Rail Britain on a new tourism and leisure strategy, developing partnerships with the tourism sector and supporting members in promoting rail. Community Rail Week from 20 - 26 May, sponsored by the Rail Delivery Group, will be on the theme 'More Than A Railway'. CRN aims to secure national and regional media coverage, spotlighting the lesser-known community side of the railway and promoting its benefits.

Later this month CRN is meeting Rail Minister Huw Merriman MP to discuss how community rail is developing, and specifically the common challenges with community-led projects to rejuvenate disused station buildings. It will spotlight the work of community rail, and stress the importance of ongoing support from government and industry.

The National Community Rail Awards 2024 has shortlisted all five entries of the Leeds-Morecambe CRP, the Friends of Bentham Station and local community groups. The CRP has listings in both the 'Community Creative Projects and Station Arts' and the 'Most Effective Communications Campaign' categories; FOBS have been awarded 'gold status' in the 'It's Your Station' category for their extensive volunteering work, and Gerald Townson who chairs both groups, has been shortlisted twice in the Photographic Competition for his entries on the theme 'The Essence of Community Rail'.

CAMPAIGN FOR BETTER TRANSPORT

Packed with fun events, powerful actions, competitions and special offers, Better Transport Week from 17 to 23 June is a chance to celebrate the sustainable transport that makes our lives better - everything from sleeper trains across Europe to walking the kids to school!

TRANSPORT FOCUS

In the latest TF survey, rail satisfaction has increased for all measures, with that for the level of crowding on the train up from 67% to 76%, and for punctuality from 72% to 77%. To keep the passengers happy, run a service that they can rely on. But with more strikes to come, the railway still feels fragile.

After making numerous delay repay requests to Trans Pennine Express (TPE), and trying without success to resolve the matter herself, Mrs T asked TF for help. She provided evidence of her claims and outlined her concerns. TF had to contact TPE several times before it finally agreed to settle all her claims. Mrs T thanked the TF caseworker for their intervention.

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

LNER is piloting a new type of semi-flexible ticket. For travel on its trains between London King’s Cross and Newcastle, Berwick-upon-Tweed or Edinburgh, it now offers:

- Advance (Fixed) – the best value fare, booked in advance for a fixed journey with a guaranteed reserved seat
- '70min Flex' (Semi-Flexible) – offering customers the flexibility to travel on another LNER service up to 70 minutes before or after their original booked journey
- Anytime (Fully-Flexible) – this ticket can be used at any time of day.

Off-Peak and Super Off-Peak fares, which represented just 11% of journeys included in the pilot, have been removed - [raising some fares by up to 130%](#)! And the new semi-flexible ticket isn't widely available. There are workarounds – eg rather than selecting Newcastle Central as your start or end point, choose Manors (which is just under a mile away), for which it is still possible to buy a Super Off-Peak ticket, but those planning to travel really shouldn't have to know this.

Bradford Forster Square station is to get an extra platform thanks to a £24m Government grant. It could result in another five London services a day, more than tripling the current provision.

ORR has authorised the enhancements at University station in Birmingham to be brought into service. An accessible bridge links two new station buildings, and there is new signage, lighting, CCTV and other systems throughout.

Regarding the lack of car parking at Corby station reported last month, David Fursdon was told by the ticket office that customers can book in advance to park in the Tesco Extra car park in Oakley Road, NN18 8AL, which is 5 to 7 minutes walk from the station.

A joint letter from the private and public sectors welcomed the Government's commitment to upgrading Ely, listed six core reasons why prioritising its delivery would benefit the UK, and urged funding to be released as soon as possible. In response Rail Minister Huw Merriman MP said DfT was engaging with the Treasury to understand when funding will be made available to progress the Ely Area Capacity Enhancements and Haughley Junction schemes.

A Bedford Borough Council [report](#) that weighed seven alternative routes for East West Rail against the company's latest proposal concluded that there was no clear winner. EWR Chief Executive Beth West said they had a "preferred route" and would be trying to progress on that, but any new information would be taken very seriously. A statutory consultation on EWR is expected in June.

A joint NR, LNER and Mobile Network Operators project to improve mobile phone connectivity on the ECML has reached an important milestone with the installation of a bespoke antenna into the tunnels outside London King's Cross station. Passengers can expect a more reliable and consistent mobile phone and Wi-Fi connection, and the removal of 'not-spots'.

Transport for London is to launch a three-month trial of off-peak Tube and train fares all day on Fridays in a bid to boost passenger numbers. Tube usage is at 85% of pre-pandemic levels in midweek, but only about 73% on a Friday.

Since it withdrew the train service in December 2022, Chiltern Railways has run a weekly bus replacement one way from West Ealing to West Ruislip because the process of closing the rail route is so long-winded and expensive. It departs at 1117 every Wednesday.

Funded by the West of England Mayoral Combined Authority as part of MetroWest Phase 2, Ashley Down Station between Bristol Temple Meads and Filton is due to open later this year. The footbridge installed over Christmas was the final structural element prior to fitting out.

Flying Scotsman is currently on static display at the National Railway Museum pending a new contract to operate and maintain the locomotive. It will be kept main line operational, and is expected to resume a programme of rail tours and visits to heritage railways in the autumn.

...and finally

In partnership with the Bee Friendly Trust, GTR has installed bee hotels and bird boxes at Blackfriars, Kentish Town, Radlett, Harlington, St Albans and Flitwick. And NR has leased seven acres of grassland from Okehampton United Charities to create habitats for dormice, with new hedgerows and brambles, together with hazel, hawthorn and oak trees.

Warning from a Matt cartoon in the Telegraph: "Beware! Ticket machines operate at this station."

CONSULTATIONS

- South Oxfordshire / Vale of White Horse: [Joint Local Plan 2041](#). Closes 21 February
- East Sussex County Council: [Local Transport Plan 4 \(2024-2050\)](#). Closes 25 February
- England's Economic Heartland: [Luton, Bedford and Corby Connectivity](#). Closes 29 February
- Dorset / Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole: [Local Transport Plan 4](#), Closes 3 March.
- TfL: [Extending the Docklands Light Railway to Beckton Riverside and Thamesmead](#), Closes 18 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.

February

- Saturday 17. Rf North West AGM, **Irlam** Station, M44 5ZR, 1200.
- Saturday 17. Rf London & South East regional branch, Kent division, **Online**, 1400.
- Monday 19. Rf London & South East regional branch, London Metro division, **Online**, 1900 (Also 21 March at the Alan Baxter Gallery, 75 Cowcross Street, Farringdon, **London**, EC1M 6EL. 1900).
- Saturday 24. Rf East Anglia AGM, Friends Meeting House, St. John's Street, **Bury St. Edmunds**, Suffolk, IP33 1SJ. 1400.
- Wednesday 28. Sub-national Transport Bodies Annual Conference, **Manchester** Central.

March

- Saturday 2. East Suffolk Travel Association, Methodist Church, St John's Street, **Woodbridge**, 1400.
- Monday 4. Friends of Littleborough Station, History Centre, Railway Street, **Littleborough**, OL15 8AF, 1900.
- Thursday 7. Rf London & South East, Sussex & Coastway division. **Online**, 1800 (Also 11 April, Methodist church hall, Perrymount Road, Haywards Heath, West Sussex, RH16 3DN)
- Monday 11. Ribble Valley Rail, The New Inn, Parson Lane, **Clitheroe**, 1900 (Also the second Monday of alternate months).
- Wednesday 13. Rf London & South East, Eastern division. **Online**, 1900 (Also the second Wednesday of alternate months).
- Thursday 14. Rf London & South East, Herts & Beds division, **Online**, 1930 (Also 27 April in person and 29 May).
- Monday 18. Community Rail Awards 2024, **Swansea** Arena, 1700.
- Wednesday 20. Friends of the Barton Line, White Swan at **Barton** interchange, 1800 (Also 16 May at the No.1 inn, Cleethorpes station. 1900).
- Tuesday 26. Levenmouth Rail Campaign, Fife Renewables Innovation Centre, Ajax Way, **Methil**, Leven, KY8 3RS and **Online**, 1830.

Further Ahead

- 2 April. Chesham & District Transport Users' Group, Town Hall, **Chesham**, 1930.
- 20 April. Rf London & South East regional branch AGM, Wesley's Chapel, 49 City Road, **London**, EC1Y 1AU, 1100.
- 27 April. Rf Yorkshire AGM, **Leeds**, TBC.
- 10 May. Friends of the West Highland Lines AGM, Commodore Inn, 112-117 West Clyde Street, **Helensburgh**, G84 8ES.

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

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