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Welcome to the Rail User Express

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Sadly, we are now into another round of working from home, forcing many rail operators to cut services, especially on commuter routes. We can but hope that this Covid peak soon passes, so that the rail recovery that began in 2021 can pick up again in time for the holiday season.

Roger Smith

We continue with the usual roundup of news items from groups around Great Britain. Please keep your contributions coming: they are all gratefully received.

Friends of the Far North Line

The Highland Council has granted planning permission for a timber loading facility at remote Altnabreac station, initially for a trial period. Up to three trains a week will save around 400 lorry journeys. Specialised low ground pressure vehicles will haul the timber from the forest to the loading point, which is adjacent to the running line, so there is no need to construct a siding.

And intending passengers at the first of eight request stop stations on the Far North Line can now alert the driver directly, removing the need for trains to slow down in case of a hand signal on their approach to the station. A radio mast at Scotscladder Station allows the request stop console to access the Radio Electronic Token Block signalling system directly. [However, the NR journey planner still has this note: "If you are waiting to catch the train, make yourself clearly visible to the driver as your train approaches" – Ed.]

Lakes Line Rail User Group

Owain Roberts and Martin Keating from Northern told the AGM in October that leisure travel was back above its pre-Covid level, and the Lakes Line was an important part of this; in Cumbria, 98% of its pre-Covid service was running. They thanked the Friends of the Lakes Line for their work, and noted also the work of the CRP in engaging with outside bodies such as schools.

There was much praise from the floor for the timetable booklet for Northern's Cumbria lines, and delight on hearing it would be reissued for December 2021. The area is the only one in the franchise to have the luxury of a paper timetable, which Community Rail Cumbria and other bodies have helped to fund.

LLRUG was by no means alone in its concern that the Windermere Gateway consultation document seemed to be aimed at road traffic, and could make arriving by rail less attractive. The relevant National Park Authority committee was to consider responses at the end of November, so LLRUG hopes to see a revised version before too long.

Both the Integrated Rail Plan and the Union Connectivity Review are underwhelming. The IRP fails to directly address the lack of capacity through the Castlefield Corridor, the two-track section between Manchester Piccadilly and Deansgate stations. And despite regular references to increasing capacity, it ignores the Lakes Line's need both for a dynamic passing loop to permit 2-trains/hour, and to electrify the line, which would obviate diesel trains running for miles under the wires. The UCR is lengthy but not pithy: lots of words but no action plan. It includes an upgrade to the West Coast Main Line (WCML) north of Crewe, but not LLRUG's suggestion to improve its capacity with lengthy dynamic loops for freight trains.

Support The Oldham Rochdale Manchester Lines

STORM is dismayed by confirmation that there are currently no plans for a through rail service to Manchester Airport from the Rochdale area. Back in 2014, Transport for Greater Manchester and Manchester City Council promised one in writing as soon as the Ordsall Chord was built. Rochdale Borough council taxpayers duly contributed to the cost of the Airport Link and station. Now, many other towns that did not such as Liverpool, Leeds, Preston, Blackpool and Huddersfield are the beneficiaries of Rochdale taxpayers. Even worse, the two trains/hour from Manchester Victoria to the Airport that have provided a connection from Rochdale are being reduced to one an hour. Nor do Rochdale and the Calder Valley have any cross-platform connection at Piccadilly for London, the Midlands, the South or indeed anywhere south of the line from Chester to the Wash.

A Transport for the North (TfN) Rail North Committee meeting was urged to reject the draft December 2022 timetable without a clear plan for improving the North's railway infrastructure. Greater Manchester Mayor Andy Burnham said: "In 2014 we were promised an expanded timetable for the North, but at the moment we're looking at a managed decline of railways in the North with no end in sight."

Northern Weekly Salvo – Paul Salvesson

Congratulations, Paul, on your 300th edition of the Salvo.

The Rail Reform Group has published what it rightly terms [a considered view](#) of the much criticised IRP; here is an excerpt: "The background to the Plan is that the country is still going through a pandemic that has ravaged its finances, and changed the market for travel to the extent that rail has lost as much as 50% of its commuting business...The IRP was intended to identify how HS2, Northern Powerhouse Rail and Midlands Rail Hub would dovetail together for a network of high speed routes...It was not meant to be a total blueprint for the Midlands and North."

Paul's report "New Futures for Rural Rail" in the early 1990s helped to set up the movement that became 'Community Rail'. The RRG website is now hosting the 'final' version of his latest paper [Building on Success; Future directions for Community Rail](#). Notwithstanding, Paul sees the paper as very much 'work in progress', and would welcome feedback.

English Regional Transport Association

An express parcel service by rail on the WCML is a grand start, but ideally there needs to be a nationwide send/collect facility at every station serving a population upwards of 500 people within a radial catchment of say 5 miles. Amazon/DHL/Fed Ex/Post Office/UPS and other carriers would be incentivised to let rail do a long haul, and do only local deliveries using greener vehicles.

Bedford Commuters Association

Tom Moran, MD Thameslink & Great Northern; Will Rogers, MD East Midland Railway (EMR), and Gary Walsh, NR Route Director East Midlands, attended a joint meeting on Zoom with BCA and the Bedford-based Association of Public Transport Users. Highlights from the Q&A session were:

- In readiness for the new bi-modes (33 x 5-car units), EMR's current fleet of Meridians will be modified into 5-car units.
- The Class 360 refurbishment is ongoing, but has slipped due to Covid. It includes power sockets, wi-fi, a new internal layout with 2+2 seating, and a modern passenger information system. However, no second toilet will be provided on each 4-car unit.
- The retrofit of wi-fi and seat-back tables on the Thameslink Class 700s is awaiting DfT funding, and is not expected to be taken forward in 2022.
- The new Brent Cross station is progressing well and will not need any further blockades in 2022. However, seven will be needed when overhead wiring south of Bedford is improved as part of a power upgrade that will allow EMR services to run at 125mph.
- Access for All at Flitwick has been funded with a completion date of 2024.
- EMR has issued 6,000 of the new Flexi Season tickets, but they are not proving as popular as hoped. There was no news yet on the simplification of ticketing.

At the EMR Stakeholder Conference in Nottingham, responding to the BCA Chairman, MD Will Rogers hoped that the first refurbished Class 360 would be completed in 2022. However, restoration of InterCity services to Bedford was a matter for the DfT, as it determined the timetable specification.

Chesham & District Transport Users' Group

At a 'Meet the Managers' Meeting on 4 January, two Transport for London (TfL) managers thought that the recent delays and cancellations to Chesham services were mostly Covid-related; they were genuinely surprised to learn from regular commuters past or present that many of the issues have been going on for a number of years. CTUG is aware of the difficulties of operating a relatively long single-track branch line, but the lack of investment is frustrating. It was once double tracked and carried freight, but TfL has no interest in investing, even in a passing loop that would permit more traffic than the current half-hourly service.

After the meeting, both managers said how useful they found it to hear user experiences at first hand, and that it was their mission to improve customer information. One said: "The announcements are definitely within our gift, so I will work to improve these straight away. We have recently made adjustments to the 'good service' status – so hopefully Chesham customers will start to notice that there has been a change! The electronic displays may be a tougher nut to crack as they are linked to the signalling system – they are set to be updated and replaced by the [4LM project](#) [*Four Lines Modernisation – Ed*]. However, I will see what can be done."

Tonbridge Line Commuters

TLC is sad to report the death of John Reynolds on 11 December. A TLC and Rf stalwart, John will also be much missed by many involved in the Sussex CRP.

RAILFUTURE

Rf welcomes new members, both individual and groups: the more we are, the more weight to our 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](#).



Rf's [Rail User Group Awards](#) will be held at its 2022 National AGM, close to Bristol Parkway station, on Saturday 16 July (see Events below). There are six open award categories:

- # Best social media
 - # Best website
 - # Best newsletter – the Paul Abell Award
 - # Best new RUG – the Oliver Lovell Award
 - # Best campaign
 - # Best campaigner – the Clara Zilahi Award
- plus the Judges' Special Award, which is totally at their discretion.

All entries received for the 2020 awards will be carried forward, unless advised otherwise, but may also be updated/supplemented. Further new entries are also welcome; the closing date for all is 16 April. The Judging Panel is fairly relaxed about what constitutes a RUG, so local campaigns, station adopters, community rail and heritage groups should all feel free to enter.

RAIL USER GROUP LISTS

Rf has updated its lists of [Rail User Groups](#) and Reopening Campaign Groups. Some have passed into oblivion, but new ones have taken their place, so the number of entries remains about the same. Most groups now have an online presence, often starting on social media before developing a classy website. It's heartening to see more of them than ever choosing to affiliate to Rf.

RAILFUTURE YORKSHIRE

The so-called Integrated Rail Plan should have paid far more attention to secondary routes. However good core services eventually become, they are of little use to the many people who cannot efficiently access them because connecting services are not good enough. A sum of £1.5bn has been set aside for smaller schemes, but no detail is given, even as an Appendix. Pontefract Line services that terminate at Knottingley on the county boundary do not connect with anything at all, so are the very antithesis of inter-connectivity in the North.

Local and regional rail access to Leeds City Centre would be improved by a new 6km twin-bore CrossRail tunnel running east from a reopened Armley Canal Road Station to Richmond Hill, together with five underground stations located at or near to Westgate/Wellington Street, Millennium Square, City Square (integral to Leeds Station), Southbank and Eastgate. A new lower Aire Valley line from Church Fenton to west of Woodlesford would provide trains from York and the north with a fast approach to Leeds, and allow the Crossgates and Garforth line to have a metro frequency, with the line towards Wetherby reopened, and a park and ride on the A64.

RAILFUTURE EAST MIDLANDS

The Monsal Trail is a much-loved walking and cycling route, but pressure is building to restore the Peaks and Dales line, a direct rail link between Derby and Manchester. An article in [The Guardian](#) examines the issues. According to MEMRAP, the Manchester and East Midlands Rail Action Partnership, reinstatement would “reconnect isolated communities between Matlock and Buxton/Chinley, and reconnect Manchester with the east Midlands, to and through the Peak District national park”. However, a Restoring Your Railway bid was unsuccessful, and almost 14,000 people have signed a petition against the proposals.

Welland Valley Rail too was saddened that its Restoring Your Railway bid proved unsuccessful. It said: “There are no more bidding rounds planned, so [we] will hope to work with local authority partners on alternative routes [for] east-west transport between Kettering, Corby, Stamford, Peterborough and Wisbech, particularly for the many people who do not have access to a car.”

RAILFUTURE WESSEX

Rf Wessex has been focused on the severe reductions to rail services across its region, and the deterioration in customer service. CrossCountry Trains has halved its Bournemouth service to every two hours. Cuts to South Western Railway services have resulted in many longer journey times: some former semi-fasts now call at all stations, and some previously direct journeys now involve one or even two changes. And GWR has proposed to reduce its Portsmouth - Cardiff service. Together, these cuts will considerably inconvenience passengers in the South, and will not improve the rail offering on key business and tourist routes.

Planning permission has been granted for the housing development at Welborne Garden Village north of Fareham. Rf Wessex has argued for a new station on the line to Eastleigh, so it is pleased that the Section 106 Schedule includes “safeguard and not develop Knowle Rail Halt land”.

NEWS

An [article](#) by Rf Policy Director and former rail freight manager Ian Brown looks at the prospects for rail freight in a world of Great British Railways, and where climate change matters. The Rail Freight Group welcomed news that upgrading the North TransPennine route, the first phase of Northern Powerhouse Rail, will include gauge clearance to accommodate containers. However, it has concerns over other aspects of the plan, which could reduce capacity for freight, or create bottlenecks where new NPR and HS2 trains will share existing infrastructure.

CAMPAIGN FOR BETTER TRANSPORT

CBT is disappointed that regulated rail fares in England will rise by 3.8% from March, the largest increase for nine years. They make up about half of all fares, and include season tickets on most commuter routes. Considering the urgent need to act on climate change, the Government should be making rail the affordable choice. So instead of increasing rail fares, it should have frozen them to match the freeze on fuel duty.

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

Wendy Morton, MP for Aldridge-Brownhills, has replaced rail minister Chris Heaton-Harris, who has become Minister for Europe. Darren Caplan, Chief Executive of the Railway Industry Association, paid this tribute: “There are few rail ministers who have had to deal with such a crisis as Covid, but during the past 18 months Mr Heaton-Harris really has worked tirelessly with the rail supply sector, both to ensure services kept running, and to enable work to continue on renewing and enhancing railway infrastructure and rolling stock. We wish him the very best of luck in his new role.’

[NR’s Traction Decarbonisation Network Strategy](#) proposed electrifying 13,000 single track km (STK) of railway over the next 30 years, with a further 1,300 STK dedicated to hydrogen trains, 800 STK that would be battery-powered, plus 300 STK where a technology choice has yet to be made.

But [B2BCHIEF.COM](https://www.b2bchief.com) believes that, fearing that it cannot justify the cost in the wake of Covid, the Treasury has blocked the £30bn blueprint, raising doubts over the target of net-zero by 2050.

According to [The Times](https://www.thetimes.com), passengers on delayed trains will be positively urged to claim compensation; in 2019/20, only 37% of those eligible actually did so. The Office of Rail and Road has ruled that, from April, operators must notify anyone who booked tickets via their app, and email those who booked online.

As part of the East West Rail project, over 500 pre-cast concrete platform units are being craned into the new station at Winslow. Once the platform has been installed, work on the station building will begin in the Spring, with the new track to be laid in early 2023.

A major upgrade of the Portsmouth Harbour line lasting until 2024 starts with a nine-day closure from 12-20 February between Guildford and Petersfield. Victorian signal boxes at Farncombe, Haslemere and Petersfield still use 1970s relay-based technology; Haslemere has a lever-frame to control colour-light signals. From 2024, a computer-based system called Smartlock will control the Farncombe - Petersfield section of line from a single digital workstation at Basingstoke.

NR's Rail Innovation and Development Centre at Melton Mowbray has successfully tested Alstom's European Train Control System (ETCS) on rolling stock. ETCS is the core signalling and train control component of the European Rail Traffic Management System (ERTMS), a key element of the East Coast Digital Programme. It continuously calculates an optimum speed for each train, and communicates this to the driver, thus replacing lineside signals. The first section of main line to migrate to ETCS will be from King's Cross to Stoke Tunnel on the ECML south of Grantham.

In a letter to Railwatch, Martin James notes that (*like many operators – Ed.*) Chiltern Railways no longer produces paper timetables; passengers are advised to go online or to scan a QR-code. "What about those – particularly us old folk – who do not like using computers, do not have computers, or do not have mobile phones? Alongside age discrimination, sex discrimination, and disability discrimination, we ought to have a law on technology discrimination".

,,,and finally

Work to stabilise a wall on the Tottenham Curve adjacent to Kentish Town City Farm has required the closure of its horse arena, in which the pony club holds classes for children and young people with disabilities. NR route director Gary Walsh said: "We know how important the farm is to the local community, and we will do everything we can to support the farm and complete our work as quickly as possible." The farm itself remains open.

On New Year's Day, the former railway worker who signalled the last BR train from Wareham to Swanage in 1972 was on the platform at Corfe Castle to welcome a special train marking the 50th anniversary of the closure. Bob Richards greeted the driver, Peter Frost, who was a teenage passenger on that last train 50 years ago.

CONSULTATIONS

- House of Commons Transport Committee: [Call for Evidence for its Inquiry on the Integrated Rail Plan](#), closes 24 January.
- Herts County Council: [Hertfordshire Essex Rapid Transit](#), closes 28 January.
- Transport East: [Transport Strategy](#), closes 30 January.
- DfT: [Whole industry strategic plan for rail: call for evidence](#), closes 4 February.
- Transport for London: [The future of step-free access on the Tube](#), closes 10 February.

Please advise [Roger Blake](#) of any other consultation, eg that of a local transport authority.

EVENTS

Do please keep your events coming, both to me and to [Roger Blake](#), who maintains lists of [Events](#) and [Key Dates](#). Stand-alone lists are preferred, as newsletters may be discarded.

Blob colour indicates the various types of event:

- Rf events (RUGs are cordially invited).
- National & regional rail events.
- Local Group events.

NB. Because of Covid-19, events are being cancelled, postponed or conducted online. Webmasters, please update your websites with any changes as soon as they are made.

January

- Saturday 15. English Regional Transport Association, Pilgrims Progress, 42 Midland Road, **Bedford**, MK40 1QB, 1500.
- Thursday 20. Friends of the Barton Line, No.1 inn, **Cleethorpes**, 1900 (Also 16 March, 20 July (AGM) and 16 November at the White Swan, Barton, 2000, and 19 May and 15 September at No 1 Inn.)
- Tuesday 25. Levenmouth Rail Campaign, **Online**, 1830 (the last Tuesday of every month).

February

- Thursday 3. Rf London & South East, Sussex & Coastway Division, **Online**, 1800.
- Saturday 5. Rf Yorkshire, **Online**, 1400.
- Tuesday 8. STORM, Blue Pits Inn, 842 Manchester Road, **Castleton**, OL11 2SP, 1400 (Also the second Tuesday of each month).
- Saturday 12. English Regional Transport Association, The High Cross, 103-105 High Street, **Leicester**, LE1 4JB, 1500.
- Tuesday 15. Chesham & District Transport User Group, Town Hall, Chesham, 1930 (Also 5 April, 10 May, 21 June, 2 Aug, 20 Sep, 25 Oct, 6 Dec.)
- Saturday 19. Rf London & South East, Kent Division, 1400.
- Saturday 26. Rf East Anglia AGM, Friends Meeting House, St John's Street, **Bury St. Edmunds**, IP33 1SJ, 1400.

Further Ahead

- 3 March. Rf London & South East, Sussex & Coastway division, **Online**, 1800 (Also 7 April).
- 5 March. East Suffolk Travel Association, Methodist Church, St John's Street, **Woodbridge**, 1400.
- 7-8 March. Community Rail Conference, Crowne Plaza Hotel, **Nottingham**.
- 9 March. Rf West Midlands
- 9 March. Rf London & South East, Eastern Division. **Online**. 19.00.
- 26 March. English Regional Transport Association, Unitarian Church, Worthing Road, **Horsham**, West Sussex, RH12 1SL, 1400.
- 26 May. Sub-national Transport Bodies Conference, the Vox, **Birmingham**, B40 1NT.
- 16 July. Rf AGM and RUG Awards, St Michael's Church Centre, The Green, Stoke Gifford, **Bristol**, BS34 8PD, 1100.
- 15 September. Rf Annual Conference, St Georges Centre, 60 Great George Street, **Leeds**, LS1 3DL.

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

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