



March 2023

Welcome to the Rail User Express

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The rise in regulated rail fares may have been lower than inflation but still left many customers distinctly underwhelmed. The levelling out of demand caused by the drop in commuter travel but growth at weekends should make for greater efficiency, but the current standard of service leaves much room for improvement.

Roger Smith

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

Friends of the Far North Line

FoFNL was invited to the opening of Inverness Airport Station on 2 February; the line to Aberdeen is a very useful connection for Far North Line passengers. The track layout includes a junction and siding stub into West Fraser's wood processing plant, so deliveries and finished product can be transferred to rail, including timber from the planned loading facility at Altnabreac in Caithness.

South East Northumberland Rail User Group

At a meeting hosted by Northumberland CC Leader Glen Sanderson at the Newsham station site, Transport Secretary Mark Harper MP confirmed that the [Northumberland Line](#) would have a passenger service by Summer 2024. In thanking him, the Chair of SENRUG, Dennis Fancett, profiled its pivotal role in campaigning for the scheme over the last 18 years, and the need to simplify the rail re-opening process. He also called for Cramlington and Morpeth to be included in the new Metro fare zones, along with the Northumberland Line stations.

SENRUG believes the Line will transform public transport in South East Northumberland. The Group would like it extended to Newbiggin-by-the-Sea, to Blyth town centre, and between Bedlington and Morpeth, together with an additional station at Seghill. It is also campaigning for a local service calling at every station between Newcastle and Berwick, and for a new Metro route from the Airport to Northumberland Park and on to Blyth.

Skipton East Lancashire Rail Action Partnership

Pendle MP Andrew Stephenson chaired a very positive meeting in Westminster to update MPs on the benefit to their constituents of re-opening the Skipton to Colne Line. There were delegates too

from the business community and rail industry. Three SELRAP Executive Committee members made the presentation, and emphasised the levelling-up benefits of the scheme.

And West Yorkshire Combined Authority has shown its strong support for the campaign in a letter to the Transport Secretary signed by the Mayor Tracy Brabin and Councillor Susan Hinchcliffe, Chair of its Transport Committee.

Northern Weekly Salvo – Paul Salvesson

Some big local issues highlight the joke that the Government's 'levelling-up' agenda has become. In particular, the DfT's rejection of plans for a rail link to Skelmersdale, now the biggest town in the West Lancashire constituency. In a positive display of partnership working, Lancashire CC, West Lancashire BC and the Mayor of Liverpool City Region, Steve Rotheram, came up with a plan to get Skelmersdale back on the rail network, with a short link to the Merseyrail network at Kirkby. It looked tailor-made for the Government's 'levelling-up' policy: getting people into jobs, offering an alternative to the car, and deliverable. Yet it was rejected as being 'poor value for money', with a bus link to Kirkby instead.

Support The Oldham Rochdale Manchester lines

Campaigners warn that if rail modernisation plans go ahead, disabled people would face 'discrimination on an industrial scale'. More than 150 groups are urging ministers to rethink changes that could see hundreds of ticket offices shut down and staffing levels on trains reduced. Sarah Leadbetter, national campaigns officer for the National Federation of the Blind of the UK, said "Disabled people will be forced off the railways if these changes are pushed through. Visually impaired people have been injured trying to get off trains", she added, warning it would get worse if guards were removed.

The DfT said its Access For All programme had made more than 200 stations step-free and improved over 1,500 more. Staff moved out of ticket offices can give more face-to-face help. However, as a blind person with a guide dog, FS fears that the DfT has no concept of the barriers people with varying disability face: "Step free access is not my main barrier but boarding the train, with our plethora of different types of units. Guide dogs are trained to go to the nearest door when a train arrives, but alas cannot press the door open button". Toilet buttons are also a mystery: no amount of 'Braille' markings help if you cannot find the button to enter.

Halifax and District Rail Action Group

Together with Greengauge21, [HADRAG](#) proposes reopening the Crigglestone curve that branched off the Calder Valley line where Horbury and Ossett station used to be, and once carried a weekly Bradford - Weymouth train. An hourly service every day direct from Bradford Interchange to Sheffield serving Low Moor, Halifax, Elland, Brighouse, Mirfield, and a reopened Horbury and Ossett, and then fast to Barnsley, Meadowhall and Sheffield would link the two cities of South and West Yorkshire in about 75mins, quicker and more convenient than having to change at Leeds.

Windsor Lines Passenger Association

The current "full" timetable accords with SWR's contract, although not all the pre-COVID services have been restored. Two losses need to be resolved as soon as possible: off-peak services on the Hounslow loop, and the extra Reading services in the peak. WLPA is trying to find out why the Reading departures from Waterloo at 2050, 2150, 2250 terminate at Bracknell. There are complaints of difficulty in boarding some trains, eg from Ascot onwards on trains from Reading, and also at Wandsworth Town. It seems that there is no business case for DfT to approve the additional services.

The departure 5mins later of down Windsor trains to even out the “fast” trains to Staines and beyond is an improvement - but the Kingston services now have to wait at Barnes for them to overtake, so the journey to Mortlake and beyond is 4mins longer.

The demand on Saturdays is greater than pre-Covid, so it needs a better timetable, but again DfT would have to agree a business case. And the reduced weekday footfall has meant the loss of retail outlets such as on the bridge at Clapham Junction and M&S at Waterloo.

Cotswold Line Promotion Group

At a meeting to consider a possible strategic review, there was a consensus that CLPG should place more emphasis on promoting greater use of the line by attracting non-users rather than campaigning for major improvements.

It has long sought a through Kidderminster – London Paddington service. A regular service may need more double-tracking, but some existing North Cotswold Line services could be extended: the 0645 from Worcester Shrub Hill could start back from Kidderminster at about 0622 and arrive in London at 0842 giving an attractive 2h20m journey time, while the 1757 from Paddington to Worcester Foregate Street could be diverted via Shrub Hill and return from Kidderminster at 2045.

In the May timetable, CLPG welcomes the long awaited doubling of the Worcester – Bristol service to hourly, but regrets the loss of the 0449 from Hereford to Paddington, the 0643 now starting from Great Malvern and the 1857 from Paddington terminating there. More trains to Birmingham Moor Street will serve Shrub Hill, but the Birmingham New Street service will reduce still further.

Bedwyn Trains Passenger Group

BTPG is concerned that GWR is making commitments that will require further IETs before bringing back those that used to run the off-peak service to Bedwyn, so Bill Wells and Steve Smith met with MPs Laura Farris and Danny Kruger to keep up the pressure for their return.

Tarka Rail Association

Project lead Tim Steer has presented TRAs Atlantic Coast - Exeter Railway (ACE Rail) proposal to two more parish councils: Bishop's Tawton just south of Barnstaple, and Chittlehampton, which includes the station at Umberleigh.

Compiled by the Devon & Cornwall Rail Partnership from GWR data, the figure of over 687k passenger journeys made on the Tarka line in 2022 surpassed all previous records, as did the first period in 2023! However, Rf research shows that station usage per head of local population is still lower than in most other parts of Devon - indicating latent demand for a bigger better railway!

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](#).

NEWS

The closing date for nominations for this year's [RUG Awards](#), to be presented at the national AGM on 15 July, is Easter Saturday, 8 April.

RAILFUTURE EAST ANGLIA

At RFEA's meeting on 3 December, its independent transport consultant Jonathan Roberts presented his report New Geography for Anglia (NG4A). Its recommendations include:

- Improved links between all key East Anglian centres, eg a chord near Ely to enable direct trains between Norwich and Peterborough/King's Lynn.
- A second East-West corridor parallel to the A120, with chords from Mid and North East Essex to Braintree and Stansted Airport, and on to Cambridge and Harlow. Extended to Hertford, it would reflect interest in a rail corridor north of the M25. With so many origins and destinations, it could become the busiest line in the whole of East Anglia!
- Better rail infrastructure to support housing development and economic growth around Cambridge, Norwich, Peterborough and Colchester/Ipswich
- Awareness of post-COVID travel preferences to accommodate greater travel diversity: a new demand geography favours out-of-London towns and cities closer to home.

The report concludes that with well-targeted investment rail offers a sustainable, long-term approach to supporting economic and population growth. If it were implemented, rail would become the travel mode of choice for many more journeys. The sub-region's funding pots should be flexible about which modes of travel and which development planning objectives to prioritise.

Two of the four East West Rail trains an hour from Bedford will probably go to Norwich / Ipswich, with two terminating at new platforms planned for the northeast edge of Cambridge Station – inconvenient for passengers, and taking up sidings needed for long-distance freight traffic. Instead, Rf proposes that the EWR trains use Platforms 2 and 3 at the southern end, currently used by stopping trains to London. By adding a bay platform to the design of the new Waterbeach station, these trains could provide a cross-city service for much of South Cambridgeshire.

On 16 January, contractors established the first compound for the new Cambridge South station. The Greater Cambridge Partnership and Cambridge City Council would like another station in east Cambridge, but planning for it is only just starting: the site on Yarrow Road is not yet committed. But with the Ely Area Capacity Enhancement, double track to Newmarket Chippenham Junction, and the short chord between Southwell and Warren Hill Junctions restored, a direct Ely – Soham – Newmarket – Cambridge service would build on Soham's impressive start: it had almost 50,000 journeys in or out in its first year, even with a two-hourly service interval.

COMMUNITY RAIL NETWORK

Following the Transport Secretary's announcements on moving forward with rail transformation and Great British Railways, CRN has discussed a range of topics with both the GBRTT Passenger & Freight Services team, and its Customer Experience team that covers stations. Community rail has useful insights to share and value to add, such as its [response](#) to GBRTT's call for evidence on the 'Long Term Strategy for Rail' (aka the Whole Industry Strategic Plan). CRN hopes that both teams will give a presentation at its Community Rail Conference on 27-28 March.

Supported by CRN and Paths for All, Scotland's CRPs used the Rail Scotland Conference to launch their [Let's go for 1 in 5](#) campaign, in support of the Scottish Government's commitment to cutting car use by 20% by 2030, and exploring how the rail industry can work with communities to play a key role in promoting sustainable journeys that work for everyone and protect our climate.

This year's Community Rail Week from 22-28 May - 'Connecting Communities by Train' - will showcase the inspiring work that goes on in community rail, bringing people together and creating more inclusive communities and mobility, as well as the wider socio-economic benefit that the railways deliver.

CAMPAIGN FOR BETTER TRANSPORT

Public transport needs to be affordable because it's good for our neighbourhoods and our planet, and because millions of people rely on it. However, rail fares have risen by almost 6%. Whilst this is below inflation, so could have been worse, it's still the highest in a decade. After a year of disruption on the railways, it's very frustrating given the cuts in Fuel Duty and soon Air Passenger Duty for internal flight. As the green way to travel, rail should be made the affordable choice.

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

ORR is concerned by the growing gap between official cancellation statistics and the passenger experience caused by P-Coding, when trains are cancelled before 2200 on the day before and so are excluded. A [table](#) shows which TOCs are using it, and how this affects the statistics. By far the worst is TransPennine Express, up from an official 8.9% to an actual 23.7% with 1,360 full or part pre-cancellations due to a lack of available train crew. With many fewer services, Grand Central's 56 pre-cancellations due to a lack of rolling stock raised its score from 5.9% to 15.8%. ORR will continue to monitor the use of P-Coding and report as necessary.

In January, ORR asked Avanti West Coast to make significant improvements to its recovery plan for releasing timetables to passengers ahead of travel, so it [welcomes](#) a new, more resilient plan that shows a path to full and sustained recovery by mid-May. However, significant engineering work on the West Coast Main Line has added complexity and risk, and impacted on recovery timescales. The onus now is on Avanti West Coast to deliver, so ORR is monitoring its progress weekly.

Last year, Scottish ministers opted to terminate Serco's contract to run the Caledonian Sleeper service seven years early. Transport Minister Jenny Gilruth has now said that an arm's length company of the government would take over the franchise on 25 June.

Work on the foundations for the platforms at the new Leven station began on 6 February. It will have 133 car parking spaces with provision for EV charging and cycle storage. Sited next to the leisure centre, the pebble styled pavilion area at its entrance will have easy access to connecting bus services and all existing active travel routes. Construction is expected to take approximately 14 months, with the new rail link opening to passengers in spring 2024.

Transport for Wales has told a [BBC documentary](#) that when 148 new trains are running, more than 105 miles (170km) of line is electrified, signals and track upgraded and new stations built, passengers in the Wales and Borders area will see "generational" change. It hopes to achieve the first phase of its rail transformation by 2025 – but passengers will be affected in the meantime.

Following a management buyout from its Dutch parent company Nederlandse Spoorwegen, Abellio UK is now functioning as a standalone entity renamed Transport UK Group. It owns West Midlands Trains, which operates West Midlands Railway, London Northwestern Railway, East Midlands Railway (EMR), Greater Anglia, and Merseyrail in partnership with Serco,

EMR is promoting The Luton Airport Express. The electric Class 360 trains run every 30mins from London St Pancras International to Luton Airport Parkway, whence the new Luton DART shuttle will speed you to the airport in under four minutes, an overall journey time of just 32mins

As part of a £161million Oxfordshire Connect programme, Botley Road will be closed near Oxford station from 11 April until the end of October. The expanded station and new track layout will allow more and faster passenger and freight services.

A Chartered Institute of Logistics and Transport [Commentary](#) says that modal shift to rail is the only guaranteed way to decarbonise heavy freight. Electrifying just 800 miles of line, achievable by the mid-2040s, would allow 95% of rail freight to be electrically hauled. And an initial 60 miles of infill electrification would cost around £50m per annum over two years - less than that for one road scheme.

. . . , and finally

Working with rail industry partners under the banner UK Rail for Ukraine, NR has delivered large quantities of aid for Ukraine's rail network in support of its key roles of delivering people to safety and carrying vital supplies to the front line. NR has supplied eight bridges and 30 bridge support tower and tunnel repair systems for the country's essential rail routes.

The charge for fare dodgers went up on 23 January from the greater of £20 or twice the full single fare, to £50 (rising to £100 if not paid within a month) plus the price of a full single fare. In the following month, to 23 February, London Northwestern Railway handed out 1,198 penalty fares.

CONSULTATIONS

- Commons Transport Committee: [Call for Evidence on Accessible Transport: Legal Obligations](#), closes 20 March.
- Oxford City Council: [Local Plan 2040](#), closes 27 March
- DfT: [Minimum Service Levels for Passenger Rail During Strike Action](#), closes 15 May

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.

March

■ Saturday 18. Rf North East AGM, Newcastle Arts Centre, 67 Westgate Street, **Newcastle-upon-Tyne**, NE1 1SG, 1400.

■ Saturday 25. Rf Lincolnshire AGM, Central Methodist Church, High Street, **Lincoln**, LN5 7PR, 1230.

■ Thursday 30. Rf Annual Conference, St Georges Centre, 60 Great George Street, **Leeds**, LS1 3DL.

■ Thursday 30. Rf London & South East, Sussex & Coastway division, **Online**, 1800. (Then 4 May and the first Thursday of every month).

April

■ Tuesday 4. Chesham & District Transport Users' Group, Town Hall, Parsonage Lane, **Chesham**, Bucks, HP5 1EP, 1930 (Also 9 May).

■ Monday 10. Ribble Valley Rail, New Inn, Parson Lane, **Clitheroe**, BB7 2JN, 1900 (Also the second Monday of every month).

■ Tuesday 11. STORM, Blue Pits Inn, 842 Manchester Road, **Castleton**, OL11 2SP, 1400. (Also the second Tuesday of each month).

- Saturday 15. Rf London & South East, Herts & Beds Division, **St Albans?** 1100 (Also 9 May).
- Saturday 22. Rf Wales AGM, **Shrewsbury** station, 1330.
- Saturday 22. Rf London & South East Branch, Wesley's Chapel, 49 City Road, **London** EC1Y 1AU.
- Tuesday 25. Ribble Valley Rail AGM, The Trinity Hub, Trinity Church Hall, Parson Lane, **Clitheroe**, 1400
- Tuesday 25. Levenmouth Rail Campaign, Fife Renewables Innovation Centre, Ajax Way, **Methil**, Leven, KY8 3RS and **Online**, 1830 (Also the last Tuesday of **every other** month).
- Friday 28. Friends of the West Highland Lines AGM, Great Western Hotel, **Oban**, 1200.

Further Ahead

- 10 May. Rf London & South East, Eastern Division, **Online**, 1900.
- 13 May. Cotswold Line Promotion Group AGM, WI Hall, New Road, Moreton-in-Marsh, 1030.
- 17 June. Rf East Anglia, St Mary's at Stoke, Stoke Street, **Ipswich**, IP2 8BX (Also 23 September, Norwich).
- 23 June. Friends of the Far North Line AGM, Timespan, **Helmsdale**, 1030.

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

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