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Welcome to the Rail User Express

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Rachel Reeves wants more growth, which means more freight to be moved around the country. Yet in a whole series of measures, there is still no mention of enhancing the capacity of Ely and Haughley junctions. But by transforming both passenger and freight services, it would contribute to modal shift and thus relieve the A14 trunk road that suffers major delays every few days.

Roger Smith

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

Friends of the Far North Line

The Scottish Government has extended its 2035 rail decarbonisation target by ten years, which could free up capital for capacity enhancement to create the level of service that will get people to forsake their car. The lack of money has put on hold improvements to the FNL such as the Delmore passing loop, but its shocking performance has to be addressed with more capacity, reliable rolling stock and no voluntary element of train crew provision. In December, the Highland Council passed a motion calling for the Highland railway to have connections fit for purpose.

Scotrail is to replace its HST fleet, possibly with the East Midlands Trains Class 222 Meridians that are being replaced with Class 810 bi-modes.

The FoFNL AGM & Conference is on 4 July, two weeks later than usual, as the line will be closed for the previous three weeks for engineering possessions. The theme is "Invest to Improve - how to make rail the obvious travel choice in the Far North."

Support The Oldham Rochdale Manchester lines

The area around Castleton Station is set to be one of many 'growth locations' across Greater Manchester. The Government is working with Greater Manchester leaders to release land around transport hubs, such as the train station in Castleton, to kickstart development.

By 2030 the Bee Network will offer nearly 100 Greater Manchester stations simpler fares with integrated 'tap-in, tap out' bus and tram tickets, and better services. Phase one, set for December 2026, will see it take over the lines from Piccadilly to Hadfield, Glossop and Rose Hill Marple, as well as Victoria to Stalybridge, and in phase two from December 2027 from Piccadilly to the Airport, Cheadle Hulme, and Middlewood.

In the final phase planned for 2028, TfGM will gain the city centre stations and the Appleby Bridge, Wigan North Western, Hindley and Rochdale lines.

Northern also has a 5 year action plan: three fold timetables with 90% of trains on time, cancellations down to 3%, accessible to everyone, and staff sickness below 13%. It has invited Alstom, CAF, Hitachi, Siemens and Stadler to negotiate the supply of new electric, diesel/electric and battery-powered trains that will initially replace the ageing Class 150, 155, 156 and 323 trains. 12 three-carriage EMUs will provide the stopping service on the York – Manchester route via Leeds and Huddersfield. Contract(s) are expected in 2026, with the aim of having the first trains delivered by 2030.

As a TravelWatch North West Board member, STORM Secretary Richard Lysons represented it at the Cheshire Best Kept Stations 2024 Awards, the longest continuously-running one in the UK. Cheshire is defined as the old shire county pre-1974 reorganisation. Judged against a whole series of criteria, Stalybridge station won the award. Unusually for a small town, it has a Changing Places toilet (unlike, Manchester Victoria, Rochdale, Halifax and many more).

Peterborough – Ely – Norwich Rail Users Group

Cross Country (XC) has removed First Class from its Turbostar trains between Birmingham, Cambridge and Stansted Airport. Every passenger can use these seats until they are replaced with Standard seats as part of a re-fit that began in November. East Midlands Railway intends to run longer trains at the weekend on some Liverpool - Norwich services.

Passenger numbers at Manea, Thetford and Whittlesea have grown over the past year, but Wymondham has declined by almost 10,000 (5%), and March is still below pre-pandemic levels. Predictably, Shippea Hill made the news as Britain's second least used station: it has one early morning train to Norwich six days a week, but only one return journey – on a Saturday afternoon.

The Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority has published a Network Rail (NR) report regarding a shuttle service from Wisbech to March pending the creation of additional capacity at Ely that would permit a through service to Cambridge.

Cotswold Line Promotion Group

Correction: in the Rf West Midlands entry last month, it should be Worcestershire Parkway not Worcester Parkway. The County Council was insistent that it was a station for the county, not just a third station for the city. However, it may well become just that with thousands of houses built around it, and its function as a Parkway diminished by congestion.

Windsor Lines Passengers' Association

The sixty 10-car and thirty 5-car Arterio Class 701s are finally coming into service. Every coach has six bays of four seats with a small table; there are no airline type seats with pull-down tables. However, they are more comfortable than those in the Class 700 trains. Now is the time for SWR to restore the Hounslow loop and the extra peak-time Reading services.

Bedwyn Trains Passenger Group

In a Zoom call, GWR MD Mark Hopwood said that the delays in obtaining the Class 175s freed up from Wales were to do with DfT funding, and their maintenance needs. Once in service, they would firstly replace the remaining HSTs, and then release IETs to bolster resilience in London – but there would not be enough to satisfy everybody on the call. So Bedwyn might not regain all three of its 5-car IETs to replace the Newbury shuttle. If it has to settle for just one or two, BTPG needs to know from users which off-peak trains they value the most.

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

The recent East West Rail consultation saw record levels of engagement: 5,206 people attended the drop-in events, while the consultation website had more than 44,000 visits. In its [response](#), Rf urges EWRC to:

- See it not just as a line between Oxford and Cambridge, but as a new strategic link in the wider rail network to places further afield such as Bristol, Ipswich and Norwich
- Avoid a 'Minimum Viable Product' approach; electrify the whole line, not just partly - getting it right now will eliminate the need for expensive and disruptive upgrades
- Extend services south of Oxford, either to a reopened Cowley branch, or to Didcot to connect with the GWR main line
- Extend Cambridge - Bletchley services to Milton Keynes Central, ideally via a direct east-to-north connection to an additional pair of tracks on the WCML
- Take account of Universal Studios' proposed theme park at Kempston Hardwick. Their spokeswoman said: "We continue to evaluate the potential project and are engaged in productive discussions with the UK Government."
- Include two additional tracks for EWR north of Bedford (see below)
- Consider an alternative route north of Tempsford alongside the ECML and through a new island platform at St Neots station
- Terminate services at Cambridge North and/or a new Cambridge East station at Cherry Hinton on the Newmarket line.

CAMPAIGN FOR BETTER TRANSPORT

CBT believes that change cannot come too soon. Its priorities for 2025 are:

- **Integrated transport** - a sustainable network built around buses, trains and trams, shared transport, walking and cycling, and with more freight carried by rail
- **Making rail reform work** - ensuring that passengers see real improvement, with fair fares and more reliable trains
- **Buses for all** - a 'bus service guarantee' to ensure every community has at least a minimum, reasonable level of bus service, as well as better bus stops
- **All aboard!** - encouraging people to give sustainable transport a try.

Rail fares keep going up while fuel duty for car drivers remains frozen - as it has been for the past 14 years. But in a year of change for the railways, the opportunity must be taken to fix fares. A CBT [policy paper](#) examines what reforms are needed to make them affordable, clear and fair, to grow ridership in the longer term.

COMMUNITY RAIL NETWORK

At its AGM, a record-breaking 101 attendees passed both the resolution to seek charitable status and that to adopt the Articles of Association with a 96% majority.

CRN has re-opened its Small Grants Fund for England for applications from station adoption/small groups and non-accredited CRPs. As part of their relationship, CRN's corporate partners offer members a range of volunteer support in areas such as gardening, station buildings, graphic design or STEM activity, while TeamBA has some upcoming availability for help with filming work.

TRANSPORT FOCUS

ORR is reviewing revenue protection practices. As well as simpler fares and ticketing, so that key facts are not buried in the small print, TF wants passengers without the correct ticket to get just a warning and have their names recorded, with fines reserved for repeat offences. Cross Country and Southeastern already have yellow card systems in place, while Merseyside Rail is looking to introduce one this year. A Railcard Database would allow inspectors to check a passenger's eligibility, while automatic reminders would encourage renewal.

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

Developed with expert help from the National Railway Museum, a new [History of Rail timeline](#) from Railway 200 features maps, audio, videos, and links to external sources of information that enable visitors to study featured events in more depth.

NR is consulting on remodelling Manchester Oxford Road with longer platforms, a new footbridge and lifts, and improved track and signalling – but the station could be closed for two years. Trains will still run through, but those nearby will be much busier.

Harlaxton Road bridge on the ECML at Grantham is struck repeatedly despite high profile signs, chevrons and protective beams. Currently, trains are held until NR engineers have visited the site and ensured that the bridge is safe to cross; however, new technology will provide real-time alerts and enable instant checks. Cameras will give visual indications, while sensors measure the impact and check the structure and rail tracks.

East Midlands Railway has launched a series of [accessibility maps](#) to aid disabled passengers. The first ones show the layout of Nottingham Station, and the facilities available along the Robin Hood Line to Worksop and across the EMR Network, with more to come throughout the year.

In a new [connectivity study](#) on the Luton - Corby corridor, England's Economic Heartland identifies interventions key to its investment pipeline for the region.

In its response to the EWR consultation, Bedford Borough Council wants just four tracks north of the town to save 37 homes from demolition. However, Owen O'Neill believes that six are needed: a four-track EWR timetable might be feasible, but delays on either EWR or MML would propagate to the other and hence to lines across the whole country. In his view, the Council's decision is based on the interests of just the 0.1% of the town's population affected by the demolition, not the 99.9% who would benefit from an improved and more reliable public transport network.

On 2 February, tap-in and tap-out ticketing became available at 47 more stations in the South East, making train travel simpler and guaranteeing the best value ticket on the day. During 2025, it will be rolled out at a further 49 stations including Stansted Airport, making every London airport accessible that way.

The Times reports that many commuters are unhappy with NR trialling the removal of train listings from departure boards at London King's Cross three minutes before the scheduled time. The aim is to stop people rushing on platforms.

Both Barnes and Motspur Park stations in southwest London now have step-free access.

The Welsh Government has approved plans to build Cardiff Parkway station in the east of the city. Cardiff Council leader Huw Thomas said he was "delighted": cutting journey times between Cardiff and Newport to just seven minutes could benefit over 800,000 passengers.

Part of the Bristol Temple Quarter (BTQ) project, the Southern Gateway transport hub at Temple Meads station will include a new pedestrian entrance over the River Avon, a cycle hub for over 700 bikes, and a 350-space multi-storey car park.

A Greengauge 21 [study](#) commissioned by Transport Action Network concluded that the SWR line to Exeter is "sorely in need of investment". Nick Hurrell of the Salisbury to Exeter RUG told the [BBC](#) that many of its trains run late; the target of 90% on time was hit on only one day in four months. Doubling the loops with just 12 more miles of track would allow four or five tph each way instead of two at best, while doubling Axminster to Exeter for the Devon Metro would also create a diversionary route for GWR and freight trains for which there is currently no spare capacity.

Western Gateway's [Strategic Transport Plan 2024-2050](#) commits it to work with NR and other interested parties to:

- Enhance services on the Heart of Wessex Line between Westbury and Weymouth
- Improve the West of England Line service, and connections to the Heart of Wessex Line at Yeovil and Westbury
- Improve Westerleigh Junction north of Bristol to facilitate north-south / east-west transfers for both passengers and freight
- Make the case to electrify the Bristol - Birmingham line, with more loops between Bristol and Gloucester
- Support measures to transfer more road freight and express parcels to rail by:
 - Delivering three to four intermodal terminals across the South West
 - Developing Supplementary Planning Guidance to safeguard rail freight sites
- Progress rail freight on potential routes identified in its Rail Strategy:
 - Totton (Southampton) to Salisbury, Westbury and Swindon
 - Frome to Westbury
 - Reading and Westbury to Bath and Bristol, and by
 - Reactivating the Hamworthy branch line
 - Enhancing loading gauges to increase capacity.

A Railway 200 celebration organised by the Friends of Weymouth Station to mark its 158th birthday attracted a protest at the lack of toilets. Closed in 2011 because of vandalism and drug taking, they did not reopen when the forecourt was revamped in 2023, but that could now happen.

Work to create the [Mid Cornwall Metro](#) is progressing, with quarter-mile long passing loops at Goss Moor and St Blazey. The Newquay - Par service will be doubled to hourly later this year, with the through service to Falmouth via St Austell and Truro due to start in 2026.

Freightliner and Siemens Mobility have fitted ETCS digital signalling to a Class 66 locomotive, an intricate process that required specialist skills.

...and finally

NR has donated the historic plaque commemorating the 1913 Royal Visit to Crewe Works by King George V and Queen Mary to Crewe Heritage Trust. The signal box that was its former home was decommissioned over Christmas as part of a £191m digital overhaul that saw control of the Basford Hall freight depot switched to the Manchester Rail Operating Centre.

A couple from Cornwall saved £247 by flying to Spain and back to pick up their new car in Crewe. The single train journey would have cost them £200 each. The total cost of flying from Newquay to Manchester via Malaga plus a night in a hotel was £153 - and they had a day in the sun.

CONSULTATIONS

- DfT: [Integrated National Transport Strategy for England Call for Ideas](#), closes 20 February
- Medway Council: [Hoo Peninsula Community Infrastructure Framework](#), closes 23 February
- NR: [Manchester Oxford Road Station](#), closes 28 February

- Lewes District Council: [Local Plan – Lewes 2040](#), closes 28 February.
- Peninsula Transport: [Draft Strategic Implementation Plan](#), closes 3 March
- 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.

February

- Saturday 15. Rf London & South East, Kent Division, **Online**, 1400.
- Thursday 20 . TavyRAIL (Tavistock-Plymouth) AGM, Tavistock Town Council Chamber, Drake Road, **Tavistock**, Devon, PL19 0HD, 1900.
- 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).

March

- Saturday 1. Rf London & South East, Herts & Beds division, GTR Offices, Kings Cross, **London**, 1100 (Also 9 April Online and 17 May in St Albans).
- Saturday 1. East Suffolk Travel Association, Methodist Church, Woodbridge (Also 10 May (AGM)).
- Monday 10. Ribble Valley Rail, New Inn, Parson Lane, **Clitheroe**, Lancs, BB7 2JN, 1900 (Also 12 May).
- Wednesday 12. Rf London & South East, Eastern division, **Online**, 1900 (Also 14 May).
- Thursday 13. Community Rail Awards, Civic Centre, **Newcastle**.
- Saturday 15. Rf Lincolnshire branch AGM, **Grantham** museum, NG31 6PY, 1230.
- Wednesday 19. Friends of the Barton Line, White Swan, **Barton** interchange, 1800 (Also 15 May at the No1 Inn, Cleethorpes at 1900).
- Thursday 20. Rf London & South East, London Metro division, 75 Cowcross Street, **Farringdon**, 1900 (Also 15 May).
- Tuesday 25. Levenmouth Rail Campaign, Fife Renewables Innovation Centre, Ajax Way, **Methil**, Leven, KY8 3RS (TBC) and **Online**, 1830. (Also the last Tuesday of alternate months).
- Saturday 29. Rf Yorkshire, **York**, 1300 (Also 10 May (AGM)).

Further Ahead

- 1 April. Chesham & District Transport Users' Group, Chesham Town Hall, Parsonage Lane, **Chesham**, Bucks, HP5 1EP, 1930 (Also 13 May).
- 8 April. Support The Oldham Rochdale Manchester rail lines group, The Blue Pits Inn, 842 Manchester Road, Castleton, **Rochdale**, OL11 2SP, 1400.
- 12 April. Rf London & South East AGM, Wesley’s Chapel, 49 City Road, **London**, EC1Y 1AU, 1100.
- 4 July. Friends of the Far North Line AGM, Norseman Hotel, **Wick**, 1200.

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

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