

Chairman's Message



I hope you all had a good summer welcome to the Autumn version of the Wessex Newsletter. As you read last time, I answered the plea for more help and joined the Railfuture National Board in March. Since then I have attended a few meetings and witnessed the many responses which our Chair, Chris Page, and my new colleagues deal with on a weekly basis.

So whilst we in Wessex branch focus on dealing with local concerns, the board is concentrating on national campaigns. These are summarised by Chris in Railwatch but a more up to date version can be read at <https://www.railfuture.org.uk/Campaigns> - it's worth checking out!

Our approach and tagline is "a bigger and better railway". Locally we have accepted it's difficult to progress to a bigger railway until we have a better railway in place. At present, it's more about attracting passengers back to rail or encouraging the public to use rail for the first time.

Enjoy the newsletter! As usual, feedback is welcome.

Service Matters

I won't bother repeating the various service issues we have raised with the operators in our area. Possibly it's best summarised by: we have a worse service now than we had before the pandemic. We understand why commuting services and patterns have changed but are mystified why rail lags behind the bus, coach and air industries in providing better and more services for the increasing number of leisure and recreational opportunities. Witness the number of cruise ships using Southampton and many other regional ports, plus the growing opportunities for freight.

We will continue to pursue all these issues but we need more help. In the same way I joined the board to help out, can you help us locally to make a difference?

The Greatest Gathering

We had our July board meeting in Derby because Alstom had invited us to the press launch of *The Greatest Gathering* celebrating 200 years of British railways – see photos below. There were a lot of reflections of the past but also visions for the future. Overall it felt very exciting and a pleasure to be there.



Photos: M Southgate

Network SouthEast Reflections

I also attended last month a presentation about the history and development of *Network SouthEast*. NSE was one of three passenger sectors of British Rail, created in 1982.

Reflecting upon both the event in Derby and NSE days, my personal conclusion was that the stop-start lack of investment in both rolling stock and infrastructure, that privatisation was supposed to help, has not happened. It's better than it was but there still appears to be a lack of entrepreneurial investment where growth of the railway is pursued to generate additional revenue rather than cost cutting. NSE managed to get the government to invest in Thameslink, Chiltern modernisation, our own third rail extension to Weymouth, the Wessex Electrics and various other in-fill electrification, plus the introduction of the now life-expired 159s to improve and reduce the cost of the West of England route. There was also recognition that sweating peak assets during the off peak was a good idea - who remembers the "Network Days" and other incentives to use the trains off peak?

CrossCountry Issues

Capacity on CrossCountry services is much better now that more trains are made up of double units or five coaches. However, there's room for improvement as some trains still consist of only four coaches.

The additional coaches became available when Avanti West Coast disposed of surplus Voyager units. These units arrived with the café car still in place, much to the excitement of passengers ...and of the staff judging from on-board announcements! However, the café area is now being replaced by a dull, enclosed section for luggage ...which is likely to remain empty and unused because passengers are unable to keep an eye on their belongings from where they're sitting!

Meanwhile we continue to push for the two CrossCountry trains that run "empty coaching stock" between Reading and Eastleigh to carry passengers. And we still want the operator to reinstate morning and evening stops at Brockenhurst.



A double unit on a service from Manchester calls at Winchester

Photo: M Southgate

Mike Southgate

Island Line

Ryde St.John's Road is the only station on Island Line without full disabled access and is also the designated Park & Ride station. We've long campaigned for disabled access to the island platform (for trains from Ryde Pier Head and to Shanklin) so, when we heard the footbridge was to be replaced as part of the works requiring a two-week closure of the line this autumn, we naturally expected this to happen. But alas no, it's just going to be replaced by another non-accessible footbridge. A missed opportunity!

However, one benefit of the closure will be the replacement of the track in Ryde tunnel which will enable the line speed through the tunnel to be increased from 20 mph to 30 mph. This should help with another of our campaigns: to restore a 30 min interval service, in place of the current 40 min interval service.

-SG

Heart of Wessex Line

In July, we wrote to Lloyd Hatton MP, member for South Dorset, alerting him to GWR's inability to operate Sunday trains on the Heart of Wessex Line between Bristol and Weymouth due to staff shortages. We understood that the company had been reviewing the allocation of drivers to routes and this had led to reduced flexibility at a time when many staff would be taking booked leave. We're also aware of the ongoing negotiations between train operators and the railway unions over Sunday working.

After Sunday services had resumed, the MP assured us he would continue to monitor the situation on the line and said that "I've been in contact with government ministers and train operators about timetabling and staffing shortages previously and will continue to push for well run local train services". -TS

West Coastway Sunday train service

Railfuture continues to call for Govia Thameslink Railway to improve the *Southern West Coastway* Sunday service from Southampton and Portsmouth to Brighton, Gatwick Airport and London Victoria. GTR's new Monday to Saturday timetable for West Coastway introduced in June 2024 has been a success but unfortunately there has been no improvement so far in the Sunday service. Railfuture understands that the key to improving the *Southern West Coastway* Sunday service is for GTR to increase the number of staff available to run the train service on Sundays. -AM

Waterside Line

Satvir Kaur, Labour MP for Southampton Test, is reported to be urging the Office of Rail and Road (ORR) to approve an application from Alliance Rail to reopen Marchwood station and run services to Southampton and London. In her letter to the ORR, Ms Kaur pointed out that congestion along Millbrook Road and Marchwood Bypass is nightmarish at rush-hour, polluting the area and causing delays for drivers. The MP concluded: "This is a once in a generation chance to improve things - igniting growth, opportunity and sustainability along the Waterside and in Southampton. Let's do it!"

Spaces for Cases

While the level of commuting on peak-hour trains stagnates, leisure travel continues to grow strongly, leading to something of a patronage bounce-back after the Covid pandemic. Surely the time has come for South Western Railway to remove a couple of seats per carriage and install luggage stacks on its long-distance fleet, in particular the 5-car Class 444 trains. We regularly see passengers travelling to or from holiday resorts, airports and cruise-ship terminals trailing family-size suitcases, searching for somewhere to stow them. They usually end up blocking seats anyway, so proper luggage stacks could actually increase seat availability on certain trains. -AS/TS

[So why were the luggage racks on my East Midlands train to Derby labelled "not to be used for heavy luggage"? – it's a funny old world!] -MS

Surges of cruise ship passengers are becoming a major performance issue in terms of station dwell time. Four or five minutes at Southampton is not uncommon in this situation. Perhaps the best answer would be to run additional services specifically for cruise passengers. If they ran non stop to and from Waterloo, passengers could just pile their luggage anywhere. There is stock that could be made available with a bit of planning (some of us are old enough to remember *Ocean Liner Expresses!*). Plenty of carriages sit in Clapham yard all day after the morning peak, and cruise ship schedules are planned at least a year ahead. -SP

Revised West of England Line Timetable

Following the exceptionally long dry spell in parts of Southern and South West England this Summer, SWR have introduced a revised temporary timetable between Waterloo and Exeter. Much of the line is built on clay soils and the loss of soil moisture has resulted in uneven settlement of embankments which has required Network Rail to impose extensive temporary speed restrictions to maintain safety. On a two track railway this would be an inconvenience and would result in extended journey times. However, most of the line West of Salisbury is single track, with the timetable requiring trains to pass, usually at Tisbury, between Sherborne and Yeovil Junction, at Axminster and Pinhoe, where the line is double track. The extended running times resulting from the speed restrictions has meant that the timetable does not work in terms of where trains can cross each other.

A revised timetable has been introduced which provides for mostly an hourly service east of Yeovil Junction, but only a train every two hours west of Yeovil Junction. At present there is no indication of how long this arrangement will last, but SWR hope to restore the hourly service sometime in the Autumn. So next time you watch the rain come down, think positive thoughts!

Whilst of course these arrangements are unwelcome news, at least SWR have managed to maintain a train service, rather than resorting to the usual solution for any problem nowadays, "a substitute bus service!" After an intervention with the Managing Director of SWR, a Railfuture member has managed to get the temporary train service at Axminster revised to use Platform 1 for all trains, unless there is a crossing move. One has to ask why the people who are paid to operate the railway did not think of the passengers before a member of the public drew this to their attention?



Platform 1 at Axminster (on the right of this picture) is where the booking office, the café, the car park and the bus stop are located.

Photo: Paul Blowfield

So, what can we learn from these events? ...

- Firstly the railway is vulnerable to extreme weather events and more thought (and money) needs to be given to finding solutions to make the railway more resilient. These things have happened before, there were similar problems in 1976, but it does appear that weather extremes are becoming more frequent.
- Secondly that long sections of single line are extremely vulnerable to disruptive events of all kinds and that long term reliability should be a major consideration in future track and signalling layout changes.
- Lastly informed rail users need to keep a close eye on any temporary changes and make constructive suggestions to Network Rail and Train Operators in the interests of rail users. Railfuture members can make a difference!

- *Stewart Palmer*

Salisbury Forecourt Improvements

Photos: M Lloyd



The forecourt at Salisbury station has received a much-needed makeover, as seen in these recent pictures (looking towards the city). The improved bus waiting facilities enable local buses to call or terminate as well as the popular green-liveried Stonehenge Tour bus. The workmen in orange jackets are erecting wayfinding signage, and behind them to the right of the picture is the new fully-enclosed Bike Hub. The car park is at the far end behind the photographer. -TS

Dorset's Local Transport Plan

In September, Dorset Council, together with Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole (BCP) Council, jointly published their draft Local Transport Plan (LTP4) for the 15-year period up to 2041. They invited comments on the draft plan with a cut-off date of 13th October, and Railfuture Wessex duly responded.

The online survey asked a series of bland questions such as *“How much do you agree or disagree with establishing a joined up, safe and attractive active travel network supported by appropriate infrastructure?”* Well, do they honestly expect anyone to answer anything but *“Strongly agree”*?

Fortunately however, the survey allowed us provide some pertinent comments on appended pages, so we listed the various rail-related projects mentioned in council’s *“Implementation Plan”*, gave each (well, most of them) our full support and added some further insights, such as how the project might be improved. The schemes mentioned included: **Dorset Metro** which basically adds a stopping service between Brockenhurst and Wareham (we advised that safety issues at Poole and Wareham foot crossings need addressing first); potential **Rail Freight Intermodal Sites** (we had a couple of extra suggestions) and **Increased Sunday Frequency** (we suggested that new Sunday services such as Bournemouth-Brighton could interleave with existing).

There was a promise to carry out *“feasibility work for a **BCP Mass Transit** scheme”* - we recall supporting this way back in 2011 as part of our response to Dorset’s LTP3, so were able to refer back to comments we made then! It’s heartening to note that about a dozen suggestions we made in the LTP3 consultation actually appeared in the final Plan document, in some cases using our precise wording! Sadly, like the Mass Transit promise, very few of the schemes that were due to be completed by 2025 saw the light of day. Well, let’s blame Covid and hope they do better in the coming plan period! -TS

Our final submission to Dorset’s LTP4 will be published on the Railfuture website here:
<https://www.railfuture.org.uk/Consultation-responses>

Electric Spine Revisited

Over a third of the container freight handled by DP World at their Southampton terminal goes inland by roughly 32 trains per day to destinations including Cardiff, the East Midlands, Birmingham and Doncaster. Northwards, the flow is principally along the congested south-west mainline to Basingstoke then up to Reading, Oxford and Coventry. From here it continues to Birmingham or via Nuneaton to Leicester. Rail operator Freightliner is currently enjoying a six-month holiday on track access charges from Network Rail as it tries to build up business on the route.

Two decades ago this route was proposed to be part of an ambitious, high capacity freight and passenger route dubbed the 'Electric Spine'. Split at Oxford: one leg would continue to the West Midlands and the other use East West Rail to the East Midlands and South Yorkshire. The project was still on the list of Network Rail's Investment Programme in 2015 but was deferred because of funding constraints. The route was to be fully electrified at 25kVac overhead and even included conversion of the 750Vdc third rail supply between Southampton and Basingstoke to allow higher-powered traction.

But in the light of developments in motive power, the Electric Spine project needs to be revisited. Tri-mode locomotives would save the cost of converting the south-west mainline; these would be capable of running on a 25Vac or 750Vdc supply and would have a battery power-pack to supplement the third-rail power or to bridge gaps in electrification.

Road vehicle manufacturers are already looking at battery or other clean fuel options to decarbonise road haulage fleets and rail cannot be seen to be lagging behind.

Dorset's draft Local Transport Plan LTP4 promised that "We will support Network Rail to deliver overhead electrification of the railway through the Wessex Route Strategy." Reading this caused those of us formulating the Railfuture response to cough and splutter somewhat! In our response, we said this would be very unlikely for the line through Dorset and that we could find no mention of it in NR's Strategy, although there is a reference to the Electric Spine project.

Other News in Brief

CrossCountry's December timetable change includes additional services on the **Reading-Newcastle** route on weekdays and at weekends. Passengers travelling on Sundays are promised more resilient and reliable services across the CrossCountry network. However, significant engineering work from Christmas 2025 until the end of January means the new timetable will not come into full effect until February 2026. *[Not quite the restoration of the Southampton-Newcastle service we've been asking for, but it should relieve overcrowding through the Midlands].*



Portsmouth-Liverpool direct

This weather-worn departure board advertises one of many direct trains that used to connect stations in our region with towns and cities across Britain.

The **Isle of Wight Council** is now consulting on its local transport plan, with a closing date of 24 November, to run from 2025-2040. Details at www.iow.gov.uk/LTP4. Our affiliated group, the Isle of Wight Bus & Rail Users, will be submitting a response. If any member with an interest in any aspect of transport on the Island wishes to add comments, please feel free.

The Dept. for Transport recently announced that **Govia Thameslink Railway's** services (including the Southern services running into **Southampton** and **Portsmouth**) are to be nationalised on 31 May 2026. Chiltern Railways and Great Western Railways services are then expected to follow, with the Secretary of State for Transport due to make final decisions on when this will happen in due course. All passenger services operating under contracts with the department are expected to return to public ownership by the end of 2027 and will eventually be integrated into Great British Railways.

Great Western Railway's favoured option for replacing its ageing diesel fleet on secondary routes is to procure hybrid battery-electric units which can operate from 25kVac overhead supplies where available, and on power from internal batteries elsewhere. For the **Cardiff-Portsmouth** route, this means running under existing wires through South Wales, then operating from a mix of battery power and short stretches of overhead electrification during which batteries are recharged. They envisage islands of overhead electrification through Westbury and Salisbury. In the Solent area, there could be further stretches of overhead, or specially-fitted units could continue on power from the 750Vdc third rail. The timescale for taking the new fleet into service is likely to be ten years.



Photo: Railway200

The **Inspiration** exhibition train, showcasing Britain's railways past present and future, will be at **Southampton Central** from **Sunday 14 to Tuesday 16 December 2025**. Booked visits begin at 10am, the last entry is at 4pm and the train closes at 5pm. Visits last up to an hour.

The exhibition was designed and created in partnership with Network Rail and the National Railway Museum in York and forms part of this year's **Railway 200** celebrations.

See <https://railway200.co.uk/>.

Forthcoming Line Closures

Most line closures for engineering works take place at weekends, but these weekday closures are coming soon...

- The lines in the **Haslemere area** will be closed from Sat 25 Oct to Sun 2 Nov. London Waterloo to Portsmouth via Guildford services will terminate at Guildford. Buses will run between Guildford and Havant. A revised service will run between Havant and Portsmouth.
- **Island Line** will be closed from Sat 18 Oct to Sun 2 Nov. Rail replacement buses will run between Ryde Pier Head and Shanklin. Following that, the line between Ryde Pier Head and Ryde St Johns Road will be closed from Mon 3 to Sat 15 Nov; a minibus service will run between the two calling at Ryde Esplanade en route.
- The lines in the **Poole area** will be closed from Sat 15 until Fri 21 Nov. London Waterloo to Weymouth services will terminate at Poole. Buses will run between Poole and Dorchester South. A revised service will run between Dorchester South and Weymouth.
- The line between **Yeovil and Dorchester** will be closed from Sat 28 Feb until Mon 9 Mar 2026.

Mind the Gap

Our newsletter gives you a flavour of what's happening in the Wessex Branch area and some of the things your committee has been involved with.

Unfortunately there's a noticeable gap between what we can achieve and what needs to be done, but we're ever hopeful one or two members out there will step forwards and help plug the gap. Do you have any skills that might be useful: contacting councillors and MPs? organising meetings? placing stories on social media?

There may be some aspect of rail development you're itching to see taken forwards. Well, maybe together we can make progress. It just takes the leadership of one person and a great deal of perseverance to achieve the seemingly impossible. For an example of this, turn to page 6 of the October edition of Railwatch. The picture announces an astounding 500,000 journeys so far on the newly-reopened Northumberland Line, and it would not have happened without the tenacity of a single person: Railfuture's own superhero Dennis Fancett. We need a few like him down here in the South!

If that's too hard an act to follow, here's something we might all consider: gifting a 1-year *Railwatch* magazine subscription to a friend or relative this Christmas (£12), maybe for someone who has just started commuting by train. At the same time send them a Christmas card saying you hope they enjoy learning about Railfuture campaigns. -TS



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