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Welcome to the Rail User Express

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The transition to GBR should make for more flexibility, yet each time a TOC is taken over by DFTO, it is invariably accompanied by a notice saying nothing will change, which begs the question "So what is the point?". Many problems concern rolling stock, but when a solution, or at least mitigation, does exist (see last month, correction below) the new management should seize it. To borrow a phrase: "Action this day!"

Roger Smith

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

Friends of the Far North Line

FNL passenger numbers can be expected to dwindle unless four key issues are addressed: two three-week blockades in the tourist season; Highland bus fares capped at £2 however long the journey; failing Class 158 units not due for replacement until 2035; and the high number of cancellations caused by staff sickness.

Graeme Cook, Director of Rail Delivery, Transport Scotland, spoke at the AGM conference on "Railway Policy – How It's Made with Ministers". Aware that rail freight needs to grow, politicians set Transport Scotland a Growth Target. After discussions with potential rail freight users, it will typically offer the Cabinet Secretary the choice of three options ranging from 'easy' to 'bold'.

Tom Smith, Head of Fleet Technical for ScotRail told the AGM that its ten different types of unit had an average age of 26 years, but performance was improving 4% year on year, and by 11.8% for the Class 158s. 80% of failures have been due to the engines. The fleet is currently undergoing a 500,000 mile overhaul. He then looked ahead to the totally refurbished Class 222s, which will replace the InterCity HST's when they come into service from Autumn 2027 to December 2028. The Low Earth Orbit satellite broadband trial is going very well, with positive feedback on speed and reliability. ScotRail Engineering has fitted three units and is currently working on three more. And all of the Class 222 trains will be fitted.

Six years ago, the Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Infrastructure & Connectivity hailed a trial of taking timber by rail, but it is still not happening between Altnabreac and the new rail link to the West Fraser factory near Inverness, seemingly due to a lack of suitable wagons.

Ribble Valley Rail

RVR's dialogue with local and rail authorities and the East Lancs and Clitheroe Line CRPs makes for efficiency in operating and maintaining the service. The recent four-year Lancashire Transport Plan includes a new appraisal of reintroducing passenger services north of Clitheroe to Hellifield and beyond, and consultants are being appointed. In 2020, the DfT welcomed a Restoring Your Railway initiative with a similar aim, but it was not taken forward for lack of finance.

As it becomes better known, the popularity of the Yorkshire Dales Explorer and its international clientele continue to grow. It may be renamed The Lancashire & Yorkshire Dales Explorer or simply The Lancashire & Yorkshire Explorer to encourage more southbound passengers. The 2026 walks in the Dales are well-organised and supported for both Lancashire and North Yorkshire ramblers.

Northern is to replace some of its Class 323s with 37 Class 350 trains, mainly on routes south of Manchester. Some could also go to the Airport - Blackpool service, but are longer than the 323s. [*So what's the betting on platform extensions for that route? RVR Ed.*]

Blackburn-with-Darwen unitary authority is drawing-up a strategic case to consider the impact of a new Ewood and Lower Darwen station south of Blackburn on the single-track line to Rochdale.

Huddersfield-Penistone-Sheffield Rail Users Association

HPSRUA consulted on improvements to the Penistone Line between Barnsley and Huddersfield. Some years ago, £48m was allocated but then put on hold; a £1.5m business case is awaiting DfT and Treasury approval. Penistone and Stocksbridge MP Marie Tidball is very supportive and is pushing for infrastructure improvements to allow a half-hourly service. She is also keen to see work start this year on a new footbridge, lifts and park and ride facility at Penistone, as this is not funded from the £48m.

Peterborough – Ely – Norwich Rail Users Group

Every PENRUG TOC suffered disruption due to signalling faults, although many journeys went smoothly despite their length. Greater Anglia and Cross Country services were generally good, but East Midlands Railway also suffered from cancellations and short formations - typically two coaches instead of four - due to train faults, and some did not calling at Ely and/or Sheffield.

Ten EMR Class 158s and 12 Class 170s have been refurbished so far. The £5m 158 refresh includes new seat foam and covers, new table tops, carpets and flooring together with improved CCTV and passenger information systems, but still no wi-fi. The Class 170 trains are having a £23m overhaul with redesigned interiors, refurbished seats and tables, and power/USB sockets.

On a Thetford to Leicester service, the only minor frustration was the almost incessant babble from the announcing machines at Ely, Leicester and Peterborough, mostly with inaccurate messages seemingly designed to put people off travelling by train.

Mid Anglia Rail Passengers Association

MARPA and Greater Anglia address problems and delays between Ipswich and Cambridge/Ely. For every local train to call at the growing village of Kennett, the timetable would need to be accelerated to maintain Norwich connections at Stowmarket. However, despite repeated requests, a GA stakeholder meeting and the involvement of Bury St Edmunds & Stowmarket MP Peter Prinsley, talks with NR have not progressed. So come on GBR Anglia, get more customers onto your trains!

The Access for All footbridge at Stowmarket was a cause for celebration, although the lifts were still awaiting “final testing” - but eight months on there is still no date for step-free access between the platforms. A notice indicates they might not be operating before the end of the year.

British Regional Transport Association

BRTA is calling for fresh consideration of reopening the Northampton - Bedford railway line, which could improve transport links for Brackmills Industrial Estate, and provide a direct connection to the Universal theme park due to open in 2031. The Midland Main Line and WCML may not be able to accommodate the demand generated by the resort. Restoring the connection could provide an alternative route and improve resilience across the wider rail network; has West Northamptonshire Council missed an opportunity in its emerging transport strategy to seek Government backing for a new feasibility study?

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](#).

RAILFUTURE YORKSHIRE

NR has completed on-site surveys and ground investigation works to develop detailed designs for a station at Thorpe Park between Cross Gates and Garforth on the Leeds - York line, with at least two tph each way. Subject to planning approval by Leeds City Council, the full business case will be submitted to West Yorkshire Combined Authority for approval, currently expected next Spring. The station is expected to open in 2028.

Andrew Oldfield believes that an hourly service each way on a Chesterfield – Waverley – Sheffield – Dronfield - Chesterfield loop via the Barrow Hill freight line is viable and does not require a turnround platform in Sheffield station.

With short formations running at 12% and cancellations at 3%, Northern’s Class 15x units dating from 1984 to 1989 need urgent replacement. Their diesel engines are inefficient and polluting; they generally lack modern amenities such as air conditioning and selective door opening, and serious corrosion problems on some of the Class 150s are very costly. As a pillar of Northern’s “30 by 30” growth plan and a stated aim of the DfT, improved performance should weigh heavily in the assessment of fleet replacement.

RAILFUTURE EAST ANGLIA

Ely Area Capacity Enhancement was about to start only for the Treasury to deem it unaffordable. Its strong business case and benefit-cost ratio based on more freight trains make too little of the equally great need for extra passenger trains from Peterborough, King’s Lynn and Norwich into Cambridge and across the Ox-Cam Arc. For the Treasury to recognise its national strategic importance, Cambridgeshire & Peterborough Mayor Paul Bristow has coined the term "Ox-Cam Eastern Gateway" (OCEG) to link EACE into the Government’s well-funded growth corridor.

EACE includes the cost of renewing both the Cutter and the Common Muckhill bridges over the River Great Ouse, but should it? Built just north of Ely station where the railway cuts across a large meander in the river, they have been problematic for 50 years, so should be included in NR’s renewal budget, not EACE/OCEG’s. NR can only renew like with like, but local additional funding may be available to enhance their capacity. Speed limits of 20mph for freight trains and 35mph for passenger trains take out a lot of capacity. Simply removing the former would help.

RAILFUTURE LONDON & SOUTH EAST

Correction: the reference to SWR Class 444's going into storage last month should have been to Class 450. The term Desiro applies to both, and I picked the wrong one – *Ed*.

RAILFUTURE WALES

Rf has long aspired for a West Wales - Bristol service, so it supports the Welsh Government's plans for a two hourly open-access service by extending its Fishguard and Milford Haven - Cardiff services to Bristol Temple Meads. GWR opposes the idea as it may abstract revenue from its Cardiff - Bristol service; this should not be an issue though as it will soon be part of GBR, and TfW is owned by the Welsh Government. However, capacity issues in the Severn Tunnel and the Bristol area may be a valid concern. So RfW is liaising with Rf Severnside on extending a GWR service to West Wales every two hours to avoid the problem for now, but it will have to be resolved before the [Cardiff - Bristol stopping service serving six new stations](#) is launched.

Mark Barry, Professor of Practice in Connectivity at Cardiff University, has called for a station at Caerleon to boost the local service at the southern end of the Hereford - Newport line. He believes this is a better use of scarce resources than some other TfW projects such as reopening a link from the Ebbw Vale line to Abertillery. Rf supports both projects.

RAILFUTURE WESSEX

After ORR rejected Alliance Rail's bid to run an open access service between London Waterloo and Marchwood on the Waterside line, the company made a fresh submission in July, addressing all of the points of contention. Rf supports the new bid as it would restore the Southampton service to pre-Covid levels; starting it from the Waterside line, together with fast trains from Totton and Hook would be a substantial bonus. The outcome of the revised bid is awaited with great interest.

RAILFUTURE DEVON AND CORNWALL

With a 13,000 population, Tavistock meets NR's 2024 Connecting Communities criteria for reopening, so Rf affiliate TavyRail wants to reinstate a service to Bere Alston as part of the emerging Plymouth Metro network. The Peninsula Transport STB has proposed new stations at Plympton and Laira in a network stretching from Liskeard to Ivybridge. Devon CC submitted a strategic case to the DfT in 2022, and is seeking funding for an outline business case.

CAMPAIGN FOR BETTER TRANSPORT

Trams were once a familiar sight in towns and cities across Britain. Today, they carry millions of people every year in the few places where they still run and are hugely popular, so CBT brought together mayors, transport leaders and industry experts for a Time for Trams conference, where the mood was one of optimism and ambition.

International rail travel can often be tricky and expensive, but CBT's Head of Campaigns recently used it from London to Portugal as he records in his [blog](#). It urges the Government to develop an International Rail Strategy to provide a realistic alternative to short-haul flights.

COMMUNITY RAIL NETWORK

CRN supported Scottish Parliament's Mini Switzerland event organised by Simon Hinsley from Highland Mainline CRP and sponsored by Ariane Burgess MSP. Drawing on the Hope Valley project in Derbyshire, it explored how a more joined-up rural transport system in Scotland could work seamlessly with bus and rail services designed to meet the needs of local communities.

Lancashire schools can now hold Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM) lessons in the former WCML Hest Bank signal box on Morecambe Bay. Closed in 2013, some thinking 'outside the box' secured the £14,000 needed for Leeds-Morecombe CRP's clever conversion into a unique community space.

The DfT is piloting a new approach to determine whether each CRP in England and Wales will renew its accreditation annually or every two years. It will be based on evidence and scoring against the existing accreditation guidance, including the number of actions arising, the seriousness of any issues, and how the CRP responded to them.

...and now the rest of the news

The Government's [Rolling Stock and Infrastructure Strategy](#) sets out a more coordinated approach to planning and managing trains, with better long-term investment. It has also updated its [Railway Bill factsheet](#), setting out the roles of GBR and ORR.

NR has launched a consultation (see below) into how GBR will decide which passenger and freight services can use Britain's rail network. It builds on an [Access and Use Policy Discussion Document](#) and its engagement with Government, regulators and industry stakeholders including passenger and freight operators, infrastructure managers, and devolved and regional transport bodies.

As the Integrated Communications Director of NR and DFTO, sitting on both Executive Leadership Teams, NR's Group Director of Communications Molly Neal will align their strategic messaging and serve as Head of Profession for corporate affairs and communications across the sector.

ORR recorded 13,464 assaults on members of the public on Britain's mainline railway to March 2026, up 36% from the previous year. The London Underground recorded 5,534 assaults, up 20%, but reported workforce assaults fell 3% to 3,525.

ORR's [Economic and Financial Performance](#) report shows that NR delivered £614m of efficiency improvements in FY 2025/26, but inflation, maintenance of ageing assets, and train performance issues placed additional pressure on its financial performance. And an [Open Access Monitoring](#) report reviews new services and decisions, outcomes such as punctuality, service growth and passenger experience, and what international market participants are saying.

'Crime with Consequences' is a new campaign by NR, the rail industry and British Transport Police to combat cable theft, vandalism and obstruction on the railway. In 2025/26, over 3,300 hours of passenger delays cost the rail sector over £10m, to which cable theft contributed almost £6.8m, double that of the previous year. On the ECML, specially trained dogs are being deployed to combat it as one of a range of measures including asset marking, CCTV and drones.

A major phase of work is underway to prepare 75 miles of the railway in Fife for electrification. Over 18 days teams will carry out some of the most complex parts of the project, including rebuilding bridges, altering the track and upgrading signalling equipment. Battery-electric trains will deliver quieter, more sustainable journeys while supporting Scotland's net zero ambitions.

A planning application for a data centre on the old IBM factory site between Greenock and Inverkip would prevent it re-opening as a park and ride facility. With no public access, trains ceased to call at [IBM Halt](#) when the factory closed in 2018, but it has never undergone the statutory closure procedure. Planning permission was granted in March 2022 for development that included P&R, but the site owners could not find a viable end user. There is no such provision in the current application, and more station parking in the area is badly needed.

The new Balgray Station south of Barrhead opened on 27 September. Delivered through the Glasgow City Region City Deal funded by the UK and Scottish Governments and East Renfrewshire Council, the project has inspired hundreds of young people to consider careers in the railway, and invested more than £1.6m in local businesses within the Glasgow City region.

A £2bn development will deliver a new western entrance to York station as well as office and retail facilities, many new homes and a public park. Stephen Hind, NR Director of Business Development & Sponsorship said: "York Central shows what's possible when we make the most of under-used rail land in places where people want to live and work. NR is proud to have played a part in unlocking this brownfield site, releasing land that has been shaped by our railway's history to now shape the future of York."

A new £1bn TransPennine Express fleet of 29 battery-electric Adessia Stream trains should enter service in winter 2034. Built by Alstom in Derby, they will be among the first on a UK main line, and feature family-friendly areas with a focus on accessibility: level boarding at most stations, three dedicated wheelchair spaces and two accessible toilets.

Together with West Midlands Railway which manages it, NR is working in partnership with Telford & Wrekin Council to upgrade Wellington station in Shropshire. Work to install two lifts and a new footbridge is set to begin later this year. Extended to the bus station, the footbridge will create a fully-accessible interchange between bus and rail services.

East Midlands Railway works closely with Hitachi to make its fleet more reliable, and is exploring the possibility of leasing additional trains; its Intercity timetable will increase from 92% to 96% on 19 October. However, the improvements are being masked by more speed restrictions than normal caused by poor track quality in the hot weather impacting punctuality.

In the first 100 days since it opened on 28 June, Cambridge South station recorded over 400,000 passenger journeys, putting it well on track towards the 1.8m/year expected in the medium term. During peak hours, a total of 20 services call, connecting passengers to Kings Cross, St Pancras, Gatwick Airport and Brighton, Liverpool Street, Stansted Airport, Norwich and Birmingham.

GTR's [Social Impact Report](#) shows how it can better serve places and people. Station and train audio guides created by Sight Loss Council volunteers and its accessibility team help blind and partially sighted passengers plan their journeys and travel more independently across its network by describing station and train layouts, key facilities and important navigation points. Passengers can listen before travelling to build confidence in their journey. The resources are available on the 'Support whilst you're travelling' pages of its Southern, Thameslink and Great Northern websites.

Rf member Clem Dye commends this rather long-winded [video](#) on electrifying the three-mile section of track between London Gateway port and the c2c line that would justify the purchase of electric locos to move freight. He believes that the dilemma sums up what's amiss with the UK: if climate change is such a priority, this is the sort of issue that should be tackled.

After closing in April 2023, Botley Road in Oxford has finally reopened to traffic. A NR spokesman said the delays and additional costs to this project were caused by a series of unexpected challenges including a major water pipe above a Victorian sewer, a hidden Victorian arch under the railway, and gas leaks discovered during excavation work.

Schemes for future funding in Western Gateway STB's refreshed [Strategic Investment Plan](#) include services from Bristol – Oxford; to London from a new platform at Westbury; and hourly trains on the Heart of Wessex Line between Bristol and Weymouth with a new passing loop between Castle Cary and Yeovil and upgraded signalling – but there is as yet no cost estimate or delivery timeline.

Plymouth City Council and the Devon and Torbay Combined County Authority are consulting on a proposal for Plymouth to join the Authority to form a Mayoral Strategic Authority (see below). The single strategic transport geography would enable investment and planning to be coordinated across networks operating beyond local authority boundaries.

Funded through the East Coast Digital Programme, Loram in Derby is fitting ETCS in-cab signalling to a second rail grinder that provides NR with precision rail profile treatment.

[GB News](#) reports that Virgin has unveiled a striking black and red design for its high-speed fleet for services between London and mainland Europe from 2030. French rail manufacturer Alstom will deliver 12 Avelia Stream trainsets, capable of reaching speeds up to 300km/h and with interiors specially tailored for cross-Channel travel. Virgin also has an agreement with Eurostar to maintain its fleet at the Temple Mills International depot in East London.

The 63rd edition of Barry Doe's [National Rail Operators](#) map shows the Abbey Wood branch of the Elizabeth Line, dates for the TOCs moving to DFTO in 2027, and thus the eleven that will not be transferring.

...and finally

As part of a Revisit the Viaduct weekend, railway enthusiast Pete Waterman officially opened Cannington Viaduct on the Axminster to Lyme Regis line which closed in 1965. Around 750 people crossed it on guided walks from Uplyme Village Hall.

Rail services across southern England were cancelled after bedbugs were found inside train carriages at the West Marina train care depot near Hastings in East Sussex, which handles trains on Southeaster's routes connecting London and Kent, and its High Speed 1 services. [*They will be itching to eliminate the problem! – Ed.*]

CONSULTATIONS

- Plymouth City Council: [Plymouth's future role in Devolution arrangements for Devon](#), closes 28 October.
- TfL: [West London Orbital](#), closes 18 November.
- NR: [GBR's Access and Use Policy](#), closes 2 December.

Please advise [Roger Blake](#) of any other consultations.

EVENTS

Do keep your events coming, update websites and copy [Roger Blake](#) for Rf's lists of [Events](#).

Blob colour indicates the type of event:

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

October

- Saturday 17. Connect Bude AGM, Falcon Hotel, Breakwater Road, **Bude**, Cornwall, EX23 8SD, 1100
- Monday 19. Watford RUG, **Watford** Junction Station, 1830.
- Thursday 22. Capital Rail Action Group, Quaker Meeting House, 7 Victoria Terrace, **Edinburgh** EH1 2JL, 1900 (Also 26 November and 17 December).
- Saturday 24. East Suffolk Travel Association, Methodist Church, St Johns Street, **Woodbridge**, 1400.

November

■ Tuesday 3. Chesham & District Transport Users' Group, Town Hall, Parsonage Lane, **Chesham**, Bucks, HP5 1EP, 1930 (Also 8 December).

■ Saturday 7. Rf Yorkshire, jointly with Rf North West, Friends Meeting House, Mount St, **Manchester**, M2 5NS, 1300 (Also 13 March AGM in Leeds).

■ Monday 9. Ribble Valley Rail, New Inn, Parson Lane, **Clitheroe**, Lancs, BB7 2JN, 1900 (Also 11 January).

■ Tuesday 10. Rf London & South East, Herts & Beds division, **Online**, 1900.

■ Wednesday 11. Rf West Midlands, Platform 3, **Birmingham** Moor Street station, 1745.

■ Thursday 12. Rf North West, venue TBC, 1300.

■ Thursday 12. Rf London & South East, London Metro division, Alan Baxter Gallery, 75 Cowcross Street, **Farringdon**, EC1M 6EL, 1900.

■ Saturday 14. Fen Line Users Association AGM, Baptist Church, Chapel Street, **Waterbeach**, Cambridgeshire, CB25 9HR. 1400.

■ Saturday 21. Rf London & South East, Kent division, 1400.

■ Saturday 28. Rf East Anglia, Mill Road Community Centre, 6 Hazell Street, **Cambridge** CB1 2GN, 1400 (Also 27 February in Bury St Edmunds).

Further Ahead

■ 8 December. STORM - Oldham Rochdale Manchester RUG, The Blue Pits Inn, 842 Manchester Road, Castleton, **Rochdale**, OL11 2SP, 1400.

■ 9 December. Friends of the Barton Line, White Swan, **Barton**, 1815.

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