



February 2021

Welcome to the Rail User Express

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So is the announcement of £760m for the Bicester - Bletchley section of East West Rail, and £34m for the Northumberland line really new money? Apparently so, as the Treasury has only just signed it off, although work to reinstate the Western section of EWR is well in hand. However, its target date has slipped by at least a year; the through service from Oxford will initially run only to Milton Keynes, and the line will not be electrified, although this may happen eventually.

Meanwhile, the EWR Consortium of local authorities “will continue to press the Government for an early decision on the investment that will allow the Bletchley - Bedford and Milton Keynes - Aylesbury sections to be delivered as soon as possible.” However, the key point is that, despite the fall in passenger numbers, the Government is continuing to invest in rail whereas, other than the Black Cat (A421/A1) to Caxton Gibbet (A428) scheme, the Ox-Cam Expressway is on hold.

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

Commissioned by the Scottish Green Party, [Rail for All](#) by Deltix Transport Consulting sets out a fully costed, £22bn plan for a zero-carbon network for Scotland’s railways that is affordable and accessible for all. This can do approach is the kind of big thinking that FoFNL feels is necessary. The aim is to make rail the natural choice for every journey for work or leisure. One idea is for a 9-mile tunnel under the Firth of Forth from Leith to Kirkcaldy. As well as cutting journey times between Edinburgh and the north, it would open up capacity elsewhere, thus easing congestion and benefiting the whole network. Alternatively, reinstating the direct link from Edinburgh to Perth via Kinross that was closed to make way for the M90 would cut journey times by 35mins.

Whilst apolitical, FoFNL also applauds the Green Party’s campaign to dual the Highland Main Line. The Scottish government protests that it has spent £57m on passing loops, but this is less than 2% of the £3bn being spent on dualling each of the A9 and the A96. Imagine if they were ‘single track with passing places’! As well as making the HML less prone to delays, dualling would transform its capacity for both passengers and freight, and thus promote decarbonisation.

Rail Action Group East of Scotland

The Scottish Borders Council's planning and building standards committee has approved the planning application for the new station at Reston. Preliminary site works have already started, but the main works can now proceed. The Berwickshire News notes: "...the economic benefits of a new station are significant, with an assessment of the return on investment of £7.45 for every £1 spent on the project.

South East Northumberland Rail User Group

SENRUG is delighted with the commitment of £34m towards re-opening the Northumberland Line, the new name for the Ashington, Blyth & Tyne freight line; a passenger service by 2024 remains on track. Further funding will be required once the various planning consents have been obtained and the final detail of the scheme and costs is known, the release of some 20% of the total cost is a major step forward, and indicates a clear intention to deliver the scheme in full. On behalf of Northumberland County Council, E-Rail has also secured contribution agreements from landowners along the route, as development from the improved connectivity will increase land values.

SENRUG has already achieved significantly more long-distance trains at Morpeth, and will continue to press for a local Newcastle – Berwick service, and a 30-minute train frequency at Cramlington.

CKP Railways

Workington MP Mark Jenkinson and Allerdale Borough Council prepared a Restoring Your Railways bid for the Keswick to Penrith re-opening project using CKP Railways material. The DfT welcomed the bid, and will work with the promoters to develop it further. Three other Cumbrian MPs backed the bid: Dr Neil Hudson (Penrith and the Border), Trudy Harrison (Copeland, which includes Keswick) and John Stevenson (Carlisle).

This grouping recognises the wider significance of the railway through the North Lakes, including potential reinstatement of lines west of Keswick and east of Penrith to re-create a coast-to-coast corridor for passengers and freight. A modern railway with through trains from other regions would support economic development, improve connectivity, make tourism more environmentally friendly, and increase access to work, leisure, education and essential services for everyone.

Support The Oldham Rochdale Manchester lines

DfT, NR and Transport for the North (TfN) are consulting on various options to address the poor performance of the rail network around Manchester (see below). A further consultation on a new draft timetable is planned for May. The final timetable will run from May 2022.

From 31 July to 16 August, no trains will run between Manchester Victoria and Stalybridge, and Manchester Victoria and Rochdale. Direct train travel between Leeds and Manchester will be via Manchester Piccadilly, with a change for Manchester Airport/Liverpool. The work forms part of the Transpennine Route Upgrade from York to Manchester, via Leeds and Huddersfield.

Harrogate Line Supporters Group

Following a period of public engagement in Spring 2019, the West Yorkshire Combined Authority is now inviting public feedback on its latest [proposals](#) for a new station on the Harrogate line between Horsforth Station and the southern end of the Bramhope tunnel (see below).

Friends of Hunmanby Railway Station

BT is withdrawing free community websites from May, so the Friends' [website](#) now uses e-voice.

English Regional Transport Association

On 24 February, Waverley Council is due to deliberate on the bid for a canal on the track-bed of the former Guildford-Horsham line that could prevent its reopening. This would be a shame both locally and on a regional scale in terms of the benefits rail offers, and its opportunity to balance development with sustainability and proper land use stewardship.

Windsor Lines Passengers Association

Claire Mann has been appointed MD of SWR, and will take up her post early in 2021. She has more than 23 years' experience in the transport industry, starting out at Heathrow Express as a Customer Service Assistant before moving on to be one of its first train drivers. Interim SWR MD Mark Hopwood has returned to GWR.

The South Western Railway ERMA is in place to the end of March 2021, subject to a further half year's extension. The DfT has indicated that a new directly awarded management contract to replace it would run to 1 April 2023, with an extension of up to two years at its discretion.

Bedwyn Trains Passenger Group

The DfT is funding a study into the potential for a new rail station to serve the Devizes area that could also benefit customers in the Pewsey, Bedwyn and Hungerford areas. Devizes Gateway would be 3.4mils from the town, and plans are being developed for a connecting bus. Bedwyn Trains Passenger Group and Pewsey Vale Rail User Group have long campaigned for improved connections to the West (for Bath, Bristol, Salisbury and the South West); services that now terminate at Bedwyn could be extended to Westbury. A Devizes Development Partnership [survey](#) seeks the views of people in the local areas - although changes are unlikely before 2025. More detail can be found at www.devizes.org.uk.

West Sussex Rail Users Association

Another tranche of improvements arising from the passenger benefit fund will see improved facilities such as more seating and better customer information screens at no fewer than 16 stations in the West Sussex area.

Bath and Bristol Area Trams Association

BBATA's recommendations for a modern tram system linked to the bus network are finally being taken seriously. The West of England Combined Authority is considering a regional tram or light-rail system based on four lines:

- Bristol Temple Meads to Bath
- To North Bristol & South Gloucester
- Bristol Airport to Temple Meads
- Into East Bristol.

Bridport Renewal Corridor

[BRC](#) hopes to raise £50,000 for a feasibility study for a narrow gauge passenger railway from West Bay to Maiden Newton on the Weymouth - Bristol line, with train units powered by battery and hydrogen. Wherever possible the line would follow the old route via Bridport, Lodgers and Toller Porcorum. Plans also provide for walkways and cycle paths. Early estimates indicate the project could cost in the region of £75-100 million.

Avocet Line Rail Users Group

RUX congratulates ALRUG on its 50th newsletter since its inaugural meeting in October 2007. In that first edition the Pacers had just appeared on the line, and it looked as though 'they're here for at least the next two years!' They have just been retired as the first Class 166 Turbos arrived.

A long-term aspiration is for ticket vending machines (TVMs) at every station, in particular Lymstone Village, Polsloe Bridge and the down platform at Topsham. Promised for Lymstone and Polsloe in the new franchise agreement, they were then snatched away by the ERMA. This was a great disappointment, as some of the stations that remained on the list have ticket offices. Many passengers travel short distances, and there isn't time for the guard to get to them.

RAILFUTURE

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

The Rf Board has approved a Fighting Fund contribution toward a study into route options to restore a rail link between Haverhill and Cambridge, and given in-principle approval for an application for a consultancy to create a prospectus for rail development in East Anglia, subject to satisfactory tender arrangements, project gateways and plan for stakeholder engagement.

Rf has submitted its [priority list](#) to Sir Peter Hendy's Union Connectivity Review. At the top are direct HS2 services to Scotland from Birmingham and Manchester, as well as from London, with HS2 directly serving seven Scottish cities.

Rf salutes Transport for Greater Manchester (TfGM) for extending the validity of its concessionary passes to March 2021 so that people do not have to travel to renew during the pandemic. So shame on the DfT for not extending Railcard validity to compensate people who can't travel.

In the future, many people will divide their working time between their home and the workplace. The number of days of attendance will depend on factors such as the benefit of interacting with others, and personal circumstances. An Rf [paper](#) sets out its views on how flexible season tickets might work for a mid-2021 launch date.

COMMUNITY RAIL NETWORK

On 13 January, a Zoom meeting discussed the Draft Prospectus for the proposed Calder Valley Line CRP. Rochdale Councillor John Blundell welcomed fellow Calderdale and Rochdale councillors, along with STORM and HADRAG representatives and those of station friends groups from along the line. Over the next few months, Rochdale Council will officially approve and commence hosting the CRP, and employ a rail officer.

Keith Williams' Rail Review, the first root and branch review of the rail industry in a generation, makes a number of recommendations, but ministers are taking the impact of the pandemic into account when deciding on next steps. A white paper with details on plans for rail reform, including the ongoing role for CRPs, will be published once the course of the pandemic becomes clearer. The DfT hopes to provide a further update at the upcoming Community Rail Conference – 16 March.

CRN continues to engage with industry and government partners on community rail's vital role in recovery from the pandemic when restrictions are lifted, it has drawn on its [Briefing on Recovery](#) to get across that community rail has a key part to play, and is also encouraging its use in conversations at local and regional level. In partnership with Rail Delivery Group, it is planning a series of six regional/national PR campaigns in late March, to raise the profile of community rail work. Rather than promoting rail travel, it will focus on showing how railways and communities can work together, but CRN hopes it will act as a precursor to rail promotions restarting.

The DfT has granted formal accreditation to Worcestershire CRP, which was set up in 2019 to bring together the local rail industry and volunteers. Those in Evesham have tended to the station's garden, while the Malvern Link Community Forest Group has planted a mini orchard.

The Bentham Line and the Leeds-Morecambe CRP are celebrating a special two-year anniversary. On 23 January 2019, Peter Wilkinson, Passenger Services MD, DfT Rail Group, named a Class 150 train '**The Bentham Line – A Dementia-Friendly Railway**'. This particular class of unit was chosen as it can act as a 'roving ambassador' over the whole Northern network for the work of the Bentham Line 'Dementia and Community Rail' project team.

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

The Welsh Government has accepted in principle all of the [final recommendations](#) of the South East Wales Transport Commission aimed at tackling congestion with more train stations and services. It aims to increase capacity, reduce journey times and improve network resilience.

The DfT intends to cut TfN's core budget from £10m to £6m in the next financial year – a reduction that follows another in the current year. Funding for the roll out of contactless payment systems on the north's rail, bus, and tram networks is to be cut entirely.

TfGM has taken over operation of Horwich Parkway Station from Northern Trains. It will work with local partners and the rail industry to ensure stations are accessible, integrated and reflect the needs of their communities.

West Yorkshire Combined Authority is inviting feedback on its [Rail Strategy](#), which identifies clear gaps in connectivity within the region and beyond, where strong travel demand potential is being held back by poor rail connections. The vision is to enable travel from anywhere in West Yorkshire to anywhere else in the region, at least twice per hour, at the same time each hour, all day and every day – seamlessly, simply, reliably, and with no worries about ticketing.

The Times reports that over £140m has been spent buying property to make way for the eastern leg of HS2, even though this phase has yet to be confirmed. A DfT spokesman says that the Integrated Rail Plan (IRP) [*which should have been published by the end of 2020* – Ed.] will inform the final scope of Phase 2b and its integration with Northern Powerhouse Rail; any property that is not required would be resold. HS2 Minister Andrew Stephenson subsequently published additional safeguarding directions for the Eastern Leg to reflect the latest design, and said that he aimed to publish the IRP "early this year".

As a key input to the IRP, the National Infrastructure Commission was asked to examine the rail needs of the Midlands and North. In [response](#) to its final report, Greengauge 21 agrees that HS2 options north of the Trent should be examined thoroughly, but suggests that the case for the Eastern arm would be much stronger if it focused some 15mls further east on the ECML corridor rather than along the M1 corridor/Erewash Valley.

Meanwhile, according to the Daily Telegraph, more than £115m has been spent on Crossrail 2, a second north-south rail link across London, of which more than £83m went to DfT and TfL consultants. Last autumn, Sadiq Khan, the London Mayor, put the £33bn project on hold in return for a central Government bailout of TfL.

In its [submission](#) to the Transport Committee's Major Transport Infrastructure Projects inquiry, the Railway Industry Association urges the Government to plan for the long-term, provide visibility for future rail projects, and not to reopen schemes once they have received political support. Greater certainty and pace can unlock efficiencies, and help to realise the full potential value of rail investment. With support and firm commitment, the rail supply chain has the capability to deliver the complex projects needed to improve the UK rail network.

NR has transferred the signalling system on the Durham Coast line in the Billingham/Stockton area to a state-of-the-art centre in York. To make space for the new equipment, the signal boxes at Norton West and Billingham are being removed.

At Werrington, north of Peterborough, NR has replaced the flat crossing from the Stamford to the Spalding line with a 500ft curved concrete box pushed under the East Coast Main Line. This novel construction technique for the UK meant that a limited service could operate on the ECML from 16-24 January, rather than a full closure for up to a month.

On 29 December, Heathrow Express launched a newly refurbished fleet of 12 Class 387 trains. Regenerative braking rather than brake shoes and discs reduces wear and tear, minimises flats caused by 'wheel slides', and feeds electricity back into the power grid. The European Train Control System continuously displays the optimum safe speed for each train, and can take control if the maximum permissible speed is exceeded.

The Go-Ahead Group is set to hire more than 1,100 apprentices in 2021, demonstrating a commitment to invest in its workforce and plan for a recovery in public transport usage once COVID-19 restrictions are eased. On Govia Thameslink Railway, the Group has set a target of hiring 200 apprentices in train driving, customer service and engineering, while Southeastern's apprenticeship target is 220. In 2020 Southeastern was named as one of the Top 100 Apprentice Employers in the UK – the only train operating company to make the Government shortlist.

In the decarbonisation debate, as an alternative to hydrogen fuel cells, Wesley Paxton commends [compressed natural gas \(CNG\)](#), which is in plentiful supply, safer than hydrogen, and burns cleaner and with less CO₂ than the hydrocarbons in diesel fuel.

FM Conway has extended its agreement with the Port of Tilbury for a further five years to load the thousands of tons of aggregate that arrive at the port each month from Norway for its facility at Theale, west of Reading. Rail freight has doubled, with two Freightliner trains a week now leaving Tilbury.

,,,and finally

A Grade II listed signal box on the platform of Torre station in Torquay, complete with levers, but with full planning permission for conversion into a holiday home, sold at auction for £65,750.

Alternatively, how about a potential pub under Victoria Station in Manchester, once home to the BR Staff Association Club? According to the [lettings listing](#), the unit, which is 'under offer', is in need of 'significant investment and refurbishment'.

The UK's heritage railways are resigned to the loss of domestic coal supply early next year. The Heritage Railway Association (HRA) comments: "in spite of government support for the continued burning of coal by heritage steam operators, policy elsewhere is actively against the opening of new mines." [*The new mine on Cumbria is solely for coking coal* – Ed.]

CONSULTATIONS

- West Yorkshire Combined Authority, [Halifax Station](#), closes 14 February.
- West Yorkshire Combined Authority, [Leeds Bradford Airport Parkway](#), closes 21 February.
- Office of Rail and Road: [Guidance on Principles of Level Crossing Safety](#), closes 26 February.
- Hampshire County Council: [Local Transport Plan 4](#), closes 28 February.
- DfT, NR, TfN: [Manchester Recovery Task Force](#), closes 12 March.
- Hastings Borough Council: [Draft Local Plan](#), closes 24 March.

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 \(Railfuture\)](#), who maintains a [List of Events](#) and a [List of Key Dates](#) for consultations, franchise changes, CP6 planning, service alterations for major rail projects etc. As a Calendar of Events embedded in a document may be discarded, a stand-alone list would be very helpful.

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.

February

- Friday 19. English Regional Transport Association, Northampton Meeting, **Zoom**, 1500.
- Tuesday 23. Levenmouth Rail Campaign, Fife Renewables Innovation Centre, Ajax Way, **Methil Docks**, KY8 3RS, 1830 (the last Tuesday of every month, but all meetings currently **cancelled**).
- Friday 26. English Regional Transport Association, London Meeting, **Zoom**, 1400.
- Saturday 27. Rf London & South East Herts & Beds Division, **Online** 1030 (Also 29 March at 1930 and 24 April, 1030).
- Saturday 27. Rf London & South East, Kent Division, **Online**, 1400.
- Saturday 27. Rf Yorkshire and North West joint webinar, "Freeing Up Castlefield Paths - New Freight Routes Around Manchester", **Online**, 1400.

March

- Tuesday 2. Ribble Valley Rail, New Inn, 20 Parson Lane, **Clitheroe**, 1430 (Also first Tuesday of every month but **meetings cancelled until further notice**).
- Thursday 4. Rf London & South East, Sussex and Coastway Division, **Online**, 1800 (also the first Thursday of each month (except August) at various venues).
- Monday 8-16 (four sessions). CRN and DfT Community Rail Conference, **Online**.
- Tuesday 9. STORM, Blue Pits Inn, 842 Manchester Road, Castleton, **Rochdale**, OL11 2SP, 1400 (Also the second Tuesday of each month, but **meetings cancelled until further notice**).
- Wednesday 10. Rf London & South East, Eastern Division, **Online**, 1900 (and second Wednesday of every alternate month.)
- Friday 12. English Regional Transport Association, Great Central Meeting, **Zoom**, 1500.
- Wednesday 17. Friends of the Barton Line Rail User Group, No 1 Inn, Cleethorpes, 1900 (or Online) (also the third Wednesday of each odd month alternately at No 1 Inn and the Sloop at Barton, 2000).
- Friday 26. English Regional Transport Association, Rail Reopenings Meeting, **Zoom**, 1400.

Further Ahead

- 18 June. Friends of the Far North Line AGM, Ross County FC, **Dingwall**, 1000.

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

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