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Welcome to the Rail User Express

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Another month passes, and already long overdue announcements such as the Williams Review, Integrated Rail Plan and Northern Powerhouse Rail slip yet again, this time for the local elections in May. And an East West Rail (EWR) consultation running until June opens a Pandora's box of options, even for the Western section that was supposed to be signed, sealed and being delivered. Will we ever see a UK railway network fit for the 21st century?

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.

Lakes Line Rail User Group

Eversholt Rail proposed to convert five of its Class 331 EMUs into OHE/battery bimodes. But with a unit cost of about £2m and a charging point at Windermere, the total cost would approach the £16m originally estimated by NR for wiring the Lakes line. And any unreliability of such a small pool would cause cancellations, whilst the few qualified train crew would be a further constraint.

An alternative 'South Lakes Vision' by the Lakes Line and Furness Line CRPs proposes converting twelve of the units at a lower unit cost, installing overhead charging points at Barrow station, and overhead wiring on the Lakes Line. It ends "Battery electric trains do have the potential to be a key part of an innovative, transformational and cost effective investment strategy for achieving a modern green railway system in the South Lakes".

The Group has serious concerns about an option in the Castlefield consultation to run Lakes Line services from Manchester Airport via Bolton and Chorley instead of Wigan. It remembers all too clearly the crush loading between Piccadilly and Bolton when they used to run that way.

The Group is disappointed that the Interim Report of Sir Peter Hendy's Union Connectivity Review glossed over reinstatement of services from Glasgow to the South and South West of England via the WCML, and the potential of the Settle & Carlisle route as a diversionary route. However, an Avanti West Coast Partnership Conference on 24 March was more encouraging, as Cumbria CC and Community Rail Cumbria will be consulted at the draft stage of HS2 timetabling.

Himalayan Balsam is a highly invasive non-native annual plant that grows to over 5ft in height along river banks, but spreads into the wider environment such as railway embankments by explosively projecting 500 or more seeds over 7ft, which may then be carried downstream. Where it becomes established, it out-competes native plants reducing biodiversity. But as it dies back in winter, it leaves the ground bare and vulnerable to soil erosion.

Furness Line Action Group

FLAG is concerned that battery trains on the Lakes line might entail an increase in through trains to Manchester Airport from 4 to 7, and with trains through the Castlefield corridor in Manchester on the limit, this could be at the expense of Barrow services. Technology to allow longer run times is needed so that, with a charging point at Barrow, both lines could benefit from battery trains. The level of through services could also be maintained by dividing trains at Lancaster.

Campaign for Borders Rail

CBR Chair Simon Walton responded to the signing of the Borderlands Inclusive Growth Deal: "Ever since the opening of the Borders Railway between Edinburgh and Tweedbank in 2015, the CBR has been resolutely lobbying for a full and fit-for-purpose feasibility study to extend the line onwards to Hawick and Carlisle. We welcome the positive step represented by the ratification. We hope for and expect an early start to the feasibility work so that this transformational cross-border project can be delivered as soon as possible."

Lancaster and Skipton Rail User Group

Northern planned to move out of lockdown by restoring 6 trains each way on weekdays in the May timetable, and 8 by December. However, if all goes to plan with infection rates, there would be a good case to advance the restoration of a full summer service in rural, heritage, scenic and seaside areas to ensure that leisure needs can be met [...especially *as foreign holidays may be difficult or impossible due to Covid – Ed.*]

Skipton-East Lancashire Rail Action Partnership

The first meeting of what would become SELRAP was held on 10 April 1999. The Skipton – Colne project has an excellent financial and strategic business case. But whilst the government keeps talking about ‘levelling up’ and ‘building back better’ in the North, SELRAP has yet to see much evidence of this. It wants the final go ahead, so that it can look forward to ‘shovels in the ground’.

Northern Weekly Salvo – Paul Salvesson

Rail industry research suggests that long-term commuter travel will fall by about 40% of its pre-pandemic levels, and business travel by 25%, whilst leisure travel is likely to grow by around 10%. These figures turn on their head so many assumptions that have governed rail thinking for the last forty years or more. We need to build an entirely new approach to forecasting demand for rail travel in which leisure travel plays a much bigger part.

Another aspect of this change of emphasis concerns the journey itself. The conventional wisdom has been to push for ever-faster journeys. Yet leisure travellers are less bothered about super-fast journeys, and more about avoiding changes, reliability, good information, getting a seat and general comfort. So that means adding more stops (within reason) on many services, and not obsessing about knocking a few minutes off journey times.

Support The Oldham Rochdale Manchester lines

Work to electrify the Trans-Pennine Route between Manchester and Stalybridge has started, but the full extent of the project will only become clear with the belated Integrated Rail Plan.

Huddersfield Penistone Sheffield Rail Users Association

RUX congratulates HPSRUA on its 40 years of successful campaigning since 21 March 1981.

The Barnsley - Huddersfield line is single track with two passing places. Stations are all single platform except at the passing points - hardly suitable even for an hourly service, as any delay soon becomes a major disruption. Many sections could be double tracked at a reasonable cost. A half-hourly Penistone Line service would give the passengers a real alternative to the car, and facilitate access both to Manchester and the North West, and to Leeds and the East.

The government is to invest £137m in the belated Hope Valley railway upgrade between Sheffield and Manchester by creating loops for passenger services to overtake slower freight trains, allowing more services to run with increased reliability. NR is finalising detailed designs to improve the line between Bamford and Hathersage, and around Dore and Topley station, where a second platform will be added. Work is expected to begin in 2022 and complete in 2023.

A number of Yorkshire lines have been successful in the Restoring Your Railway ideas fund including:

- The Askern Line between Leeds and Doncaster. to allow a Leeds – Lincoln service
- The freight line between Barnsley and Wakefield via Royston, for a Leeds – Royston - Barnsley service.
- The Don Valley Line between Sheffield and Stocksbridge.

Shrewsbury to Chester Rail Users Association

In the Manchester Recovery Taskforce consultation on pruning traffic through the Castlefield corridor, SCRUA can support only Option B, to maintain connectivity from North Wales and Liverpool to Manchester Oxford Road, Piccadilly and the Airport. It strongly urges that alternative proposals to enhance the capacity of the corridor be reconsidered (See Rf Yorkshire below).

Together with West Midlands Rail and NR, SCRUA attended a Transport for Wales virtual workshop on Shrewsbury Station. Stations as Places aims to develop them as community ‘hubs’ that contribute to economic growth rather than simply serve as access points for the rail network. Lines from Shrewsbury radiate in four directions: towards Chester and North Wales, Crewe and Manchester, the West Midlands, and the Marches, Central and South Wales, so easy interchange is vitally important. However, to cross from Platform 3, passengers have to go down to the entrance level, pass through the (often crowded) ticket barriers and re-enter the station.

17,500 live in Oswestry, and many more travel in from rural areas on the Welsh border. The town was once a railway hub, but lost its services under the Beeching cuts. However, the branch from the main line at Gobowen is still in place, and SCRUA fully supports the Rail Reopening proposal for a shuttle service via Park Hall halt, to serve a regionally important orthopaedic hospital.

The 0716 from Chester does not call at intermediate stations, so a key worker for Ruabon has to change at Wrexham with a 20min wait for the 0750. SCRUA has repeatedly been assured that consultation and communication will happen, but nothing ever does.

Fen Line Users Association

When “Thameslink 2000” was conceived in 1991, King’s Lynn was to be at the northern end of a network with through services across London. On 4 November, a Thameslink Class 700 unit finally reached King’s Lynn on a special test run. It was booked to stop for about 10mins at every Fen Line station in each direction to check that the on board passenger information displays worked properly and that the doors opened in the correct places. Then, on 11 December, two days before they were introduced in the new timetable, the 1042 from King’s Cross was the first 8-coach train to run in public service on the Fen Line.

Last November, the DfT announced funding for the initial design of digital signalling between Ely and King's Lynn using European Train Control System Level 2. Thameslink trains already use it between St Pancras and Blackfriars. Moorgate trains will start using it south of Finsbury Park next year, with the lineside signals removed in 2023. From 2024, ETCS will be operational on the ECML from London to north of Peterborough in parallel with the current system. Full roll-out is due in 2026, with a new timetable in 2028 to take advantage of the increased capacity.

East Suffolk Transport Association

In the 4th Sizewell C consultation, ESTA is pleased that EDF will investigate how much more of the construction traffic could be moved by rail. However, to accommodate it without harming the passenger service, the line capacity would need to be increased by redoubling Saxmundham to Melton, or at least a dynamic loop in the Wickham Market area.

In Greater Anglia's (GA) timetable consultation, ESTA called for the 100min gaps to be reduced, and a regular pattern of afternoon services. Lowestoft - London through trains are not in the plans for 2021/22, but this franchise commitment should be a priority; they were withdrawn for operational reasons that bi-mode trains have negated. Westerfield stops should be reinstated on a two-year trial basis for London services, late afternoon / early evening northbound trains on weekdays, and all weekend trains, but without affecting Ipswich connections. Passengers for Norwich need an earlier weekday arrival in Lowestoft, while a connection at Ipswich is needed that would enable Cambridge passengers to arrive by 0900.

Cotswold Line Promotion Group

CLPG wants all off-peak London trains to call at Worcester Parkway, Pershore and Honeybourne to an hourly clock-face timetable. Early morning service trains and empty stock workings from Worcester Shrub Hill to Great Malvern and Hereford should be brought into passenger service. Finally, the "threadbare and unreliable" Malvern – Worcester – Bristol service should be recast to provide an hourly peak service, a two-hourly service throughout the day on weekdays, and better weekend services.

DfT accepted the bid seeking to justify reopening the Stratford-upon-Avon – Long Marston line, with through services via Honeybourne to Oxford and to Worcester. Stantec has been engaged to deliver a Strategic Outline Business Case by 15 June.

Reaching the summit of Worcestershire Beacon, the highest point of the Malvern Hills, is arduous and too tough for some. A Malvern for All proposal for a cable car up to catering and rest facilities at the top met with enthusiasm, but was rejected by the Malvern Hills Conservators.

Wilton Junction Stakeholder Group

A Restoring Your Railway Fund bid seeks to reopen a four-platform station at Wilton Junction adjacent to the park and ride site. It would link to Salisbury via both the London and Trans-Wilts lines, and provide "sustainable access" to Stonehenge, Cranborne Chase AONB and National Cycle routes. The project would cost around £20m and be delivered between 2024-2029.

RAILFUTURE

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

In [The March to Devolution](#), the Rf Board explains what can be expected from the belated Williams Review, and the economic, social, environmental and transport objectives that the new structure must deliver.

The Commons Transport Select Committee wants a rolling 30-year programme of electrification to cut carbon dioxide emissions to “net zero” by 2050. It is highly critical of Britain’s “patchy” record, as most of the railway will need to be converted to end the dependence on diesel. A [Rf article](#) last July set out how this could be tackled; Scotland is setting an example.

In a boost to [EWR](#), the DfT has shelved the Oxford – Cambridge Expressway. Subsequently, EWR Co launched a wide-ranging consultation ending on 9 June with six key areas of focus:

- Improving Oxford Station and its supporting infrastructure, Oxford Parkway and Bicester Village stations
- Options for avoiding lengthy delays at the London Road level crossing in Bicester
- Ensuring that communities around Bletchley and the Marston Vale Line get the most benefit from EWR
- Options for new Bedford stations to support regeneration in the town centre, as well as at Bedford St Johns and their supporting infrastructure
- Five route alignment options for the Central section between Bedford and Cambridge, with an emerging preference for alignments via Cambourne North
- Opportunities to improve the experience for customers, such as better facilities both at stations and on board the train.

RAILFUTURE YORKSHIRE

A joint Rf Yorkshire and North West Branch meeting opted for a modified version of Option C for the Castlefield corridor. However, Phil Smart of the Rf Freight Group mooted an alternative. Freight trains using it to and from the Trafford Park terminal can occupy three passenger train paths. A new freight terminal at Carrington could be linked to the Hope Valley line by an old freight line, with a junction to the WCML on an old landfill site. Then a Carrington to Trafford Park line could have passenger stations at Partington and Timperley West. The new freight routes would be longer, but not delay passenger services; and saving the cost of quadrupling the Castlefield corridor would lift the cost benefit ratio to an impressive 4.35.

Mike Crowhurst wonders whether, in view of the Climate Crisis, we should be promoting travel of any sort. By all means campaign to transfer road and air passengers and freight to rail, but home working is another matter! The commuting peak into cities has always been the most costly demand segment to cater for. It defines the requirement for rolling stock, much of which lies idle for the rest of the day, and ultimately determines the need for investment in rail infrastructure.

RAILFUTURE LONDON and the SOUTH EAST

[A close shave](#) near Rye highlighted the danger of level crossings on main roads. Bypassing those at Star Crossing and East Guldeford on the A259 would avoid such Incidents, and also allow the line speed to be raised from 60mph to 90mph as part of a MarshLink upgrade for HS1 services.

RAILFUTURE EAST ANGLIA

Regional centres like Colchester with significant economic growth deserve better, but there is no new infrastructure to support significant changes to the timetable. GA responded to various RfEA proposals as follows:

- The semi-fast London-Ipswich service cannot be extended to create a third London - Norwich (off-peak) service until problems with the electrical supply north of Ipswich are rectified.
- Pending an hourly Ipswich - Peterborough service, it will consider a second Ipswich - Ely service, which would boost the service at the new Soham station.
- Extending the Sudbury - Marks Tey service to Colchester would import performance risk onto a reliable branch service. Rf hopes GA will urgently reconsider this stance: the timetable should provide for through services to Colchester Town and Clacton.
- The hourly Lowestoft – Ipswich service has doubled its usage; Lowestoft - London through services would import performance risk onto a generally reliable railway.

Ely Area Capacity Enhancements are becoming ever more urgent. Rf proposes target outputs to meet future growth aspirations: a second train every hour to King's Lynn, and an hourly Ipswich - Peterborough service (both franchise obligations); a service to Wisbech; a Norwich - Oxford EWR service, and up to three freight trains per hour to and from Felixstowe. Accommodating this future traffic would entail grade separation, and the latest [Rail East](#) shows how this could be achieved.

COMMUNITY RAIL NETWORK

According to a Community Rail in the North briefing sponsored by Rail Delivery Group, more than 3,000 volunteers contribute over 140,000hrs/year, valued at £11.7m, to improve social inclusion and wellbeing, promote sustainable and healthy travel, and support economic development. As we come out of lockdown, the 74 CRPs across Britain will play a pivotal role in maintaining dialogue and understanding between communities and their railways, and rebuilding confidence, with rail at the heart of a sustainable transport future.

On 30 November, DfT notified Community Rail Lancashire and its four CRPs that they had been re-accredited for a further year. Much has taken place over the last 12 months, but here are some of the things that stand out:

- In partnership with Connecting East Lancashire (CEL), CRL completed three projects: Connecting Brierfield, Memorable Journeys at Accrington, and Along the Line at Ramsgrave & Wilpshire
- The Education Network went online, and has expanded its reach ever since
- CRL has continued to engage with schools, colleges and other youth groups
- DalesRail went virtual
- Accrington will benefit from an upgrade to the access ramp to Platform 1 as a result of a study CRL commissioned as part of the DfT's Access for All Mid-Tier programme
- With Restoring Your Railway funding, Clitheroe and South Fylde lines projects are being developed virtually.

The Leeds - Morecambe CRP has worked with local councils and tourism bodies such as the Forest of Bowland AONB to create a range of leisure activities, including the award-winning Rail to Trail programme, and to promote days out to destinations on and around the line. A significant achievement was to establish the Bentham Line as the first dementia friendly railway in Britain, leading the way in raising awareness across the rail industry.

CAMPAIGN FOR BETTER TRANSPORT

[The Telegraph](#) reports that, after studying transport links in 225 deprived areas, CBT found that 88 of 175 stations in the areas with the poorest transport links have closed since 1960, with 23 areas losing two or more. They were predominantly on the coast, or the outskirts of towns and cities in the North and the Midlands. In these areas, 40% of households had no car compared with just 26% across England as a whole, while local authority supported bus services had declined 35% in the past six years. The latest Restoring Your Railway funding round had [85 bids](#). Successful bids will be announced this summer.

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

Anticipating the outcome of the UK-wide Williams Rail Review, Scottish Transport Secretary Michael Matheson announced that: “from the expiry of the current franchise [next March], ScotRail services will be provided in public hands through a company wholly owned and controlled by the Scottish Government.”

Assembly Minister Ken Skates has announced more than £9m to promote public transport in North Wales. Set to benefit are the North Wales Coast and Wrexham - Liverpool lines, Shotton station, Deeside Parkway, and the Snowdonia Transport Strategy, which aims to get people out of their cars in the National Park.

Rather than a new motorway around Newport costing £1.5bn, the South East Wales Transport Commission has proposed that up to £800m be spent on rail. Its [Final Recommendations](#) include:

- Six new stations between Cardiff Central and the Severn Tunnel
- Revising the four-track South Wales main line so the southern pair is for high speed and freight, and the northern pair for stopping services
- Enhancing local services on the Abergavenny, Ebbw Vale, Chepstow and Bristol lines
- Extending a proposed tram-train link from the north west of Cardiff through Cardiff Central and Cardiff Bay to a new station at Newport Road in East Cardiff

The Office of Rail and Road Business Plan for 2021-22 promises to monitor how well companies are providing assistance to needy passengers, the impact of customer information improvements, and whether the rail industry's approach to handling complaints remains fit for purpose. Overhead lines coming down can be very disruptive, so NR is moving its maintenance regime from 'fail and fix' to more of a 'predict and prevent' approach. ORR has carried out a 'targeted assurance review' of NR's capability in this area.

As the country emerges from lockdown, a new NR and BTP film [You vs Train](#) aims to bring home to children not only the devastating consequences their actions can have on them and their loved ones, but the wider, sometimes hidden, harm caused to the community, in particular to rail staff.

Following two public consultations, NR has applied for a Transport and Works Act Order to transform the 8mls of line between Huddersfield and Westtown (Dewsbury). A decision is expected early in 2023, with work beginning later that year. The upgrade would include:

- Doubling the number of tracks from two to four, and electrifying the line
- Relocating Ravensthorpe station, and building a bridge to separate the Wakefield and Leeds lines
- Major upgrades to Huddersfield, Deighton and Mirfield stations.

Bradford Council has plans for a new central Northern Powerhouse Rail station on the St James's Wholesale Market site. It would cut journey times to 7min to Leeds and 22min to Manchester, and link businesses and workforces to markets across the North and beyond.

The latest business case for the [Cambridge Autonomous Metro](#) will consider possible extensions to Peterborough, Chatteris and Ramsey, alongside the routes already proposed from St Neots to Haverhill, and Alconbury to Mildenhall, via tunnels across the city centre.

Central Bedfordshire Council has submitted a planning application for a £2.3m rail and bus interchange at Biggleswade, whilst NR is finalising the designs for new lifts and ramps that will deliver step-free access at the station by 2022.

Following confirmation of government funding, an [Exeter - Okehampton](#) passenger service should resume later this year on the 14-mile Dartmoor Line. Track renewal has begun, as well as improvements to Okehampton station.

Porterbrook has signed a £25m contract with Alstom to uprate South Western Railway's Class 458 fleet until 2027 to a top speed of 100mph with better acceleration, and reconfigure the interior to meet the needs of long-distance passengers.

GB Railfreight is to operate NR's Rail Innovation & Development Centre in Melton Mowbray. It has a 13 mile long 125mph test track between Melton Junction and Edwalton with 11 miles of 25kV overhead line, and a 4 mile long 60mph test track from Old Dalby to Stanton Tunnel with 25kV and DC 4th rail.

GBRf has also announced a two-year deal with Hanson for an average of two trains a week, each carrying some 1,800 tons of aggregate from Shap Quarry in Cumbria to Tuebrook terminal on Merseyside, which was developed from under-utilised rail land.

UK Maritime Transport Ltd has launched a five day/week rail freight service operated by DB Cargo from Felixstowe to its East Midlands Gateway at Castle Donington. The strategic rail freight interchange can handle up to sixteen 775m trains daily, and forms part of the East Midlands Airport and Gateway Industrial Cluster that has recently been granted Freeport status.

On 17 March, the WCML carried its [heaviest ever load of aggregate](#). A Class 70 and a Class 66 locomotive hauled two coupled Freightliner trains carrying 3,600 tons the 203mls from Tarmac's Tunstead quarry in the Peak District to Wembley Yard in London, where the train was divided: 20 wagons heading to Battersea, and 19 to Paddington New Yard.

The Government is investing £3m to kick-start the UK's first ever hydrogen hub. The research and development campus in the Tees Valley area will seek to understand the part hydrogen can play in the energy transition in the transport sector. Canford Renewable Energy has proposed a hydrogen fuel production facility on a former landfill site in Dorset, powered by an adjacent solar park.

,,,and finally

Correction: the intimation of the passing of Viv Mitchell last month should of course have read Vic Mitchell. I sincerely regret the confusion and any distress this error may have caused - Ed.

Trained by Atkins, [Wagtail UK](#) and Natural England, Rocky and Arnie, the world's first dogs proven to detect great crested newts, were deployed ahead of track maintenance in Hitchin. Neither dog found any trace of them, so the work could proceed as planned.

CONSULTATIONS

- Tunbridge Wells Borough Council: [Pre-submission Local Plan](#), closes 4 June
- East West Rail Co: [Various aspects of EWR](#) (see above), closes 9 June.

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](#), who maintains lists of [Events](#) and [Key Dates](#). Stand-alone lists are preferred, as newsletters may be discarded.

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.

April

- Saturday 17. Rf London & South East Branch, **Online**, 1100.
- Saturday 24. Rf London & South East Herts & Beds Division, **Online**, 1030.
- Saturday 24. Rf East Midlands, **Online**, 1430.
- Tuesday 27. 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**).

May

- Tuesday 4. Ribble Valley Rail, New Inn, 20 Parson Lane, **Clitheroe**, 1430 (Also first Tuesday of every month but **meetings cancelled until further notice**).
- Thursday 6. Rf London & South East, Sussex and Coastway Division, **Online**, 1800 (also the first Thursday of each month except June (mid-month) and August).
- Tuesday 11. 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 12. Rf London & South East, Eastern Division, **Online**, 1900 (and second Wednesday of every alternate month.)
- Saturday 15. Rf London & South East, Kent Division, **Online**, 1400
- Wednesday 19. Friends of the Barton Line, No 1 Inn, **Cleethorpes**, 1900 (or Online) (also the third Wednesday of each odd month alternately at Cleethorpes and the Sloop at Barton, 2000).
- Saturday 22. Friends of the Settle-Carlisle Line AGM, **Online**, 1030.

Further Ahead

- June 18. Friends of the Far North Line AGM, Ross County FC, **Dingwall**, 1000.
- July 3. Friends East Suffolk Transport Association AGM, **Saxmundham**, 1400.
- July 17. Rf AGM, Priory Rooms, **Birmingham** (TBC) or **Online**.

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

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